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THE LOVER'S CREED

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1876.

THE LOVER'S CREED

A Novel

BY

MRS CASHEL HOEY

AUTHOR OF

THE QUESTION OF CAIN 'THE BLOSSOMING OF AN ALOE' 'NO SIGN' ETC.

'ONE, AND ONE ONLY, IS THE LOVER'S CREED'

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES



IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. I.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

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Dedicated to

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

HUGH CULLING EARDLEY CHILDERS, M.P.

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

THE LOVER'S CREED.

CHAPTER I.

A N E M B A S S Y.

‘I CAN make time,’ said Mr. Dexter, as he put some papers into his rusty black bag. ‘I will go down and see Mr. Bassett to-morrow.’

‘By the morning or the evening mail, sir?’

‘The morning, Mr. Norris, the morning. I must either get up uncomfortably early at this end, or arrive uncomfortably late at the other; I’ll do the first, for then I shall disturb nobody but myself.’

‘Shall you stay over Monday, sir? There’s nothing very pressing, and a few hours in the country will do you good.’

Mr. Dexter looked doubtful, and shook his head, as he replied that, although there would be a good deal of business to settle, he thought it most likely he should get back to town by Monday night.

Mr. Norris was neither sympathetic nor imaginative, and the notion that the distress of a client could injuriously affect the enjoyment of a run into the country by a busy solicitor, to whom such a chance seldom offered itself, did not occur to him. He would have conveyed news, good or bad, to anybody, with business-like propriety and indifference, and he held his chief to be as sensible a person as himself. But Mr. Norris was not quite right in this flattering estimate of Mr. Dexter. The latter had his weaknesses ; one of them was a strong regard for the client whom he now proposed to visit unannounced. As he buttoned his coat, swept his soft silk handkerchief round his hat to smooth it, and finally departed, bag in hand, from his dingy office in Lincoln's Inn, bound for

his modest bachelor's abode in Taviton Street, there was an uncomfortable sense of opppression about Mr. Dexter, and a rueful consciousness that the errand on which he was bound could by no means be made to assume a holiday aspect.

His chief being gone, and business over for the day, Mr. Norris, who was of a spare habit, narrow-chested, and on bad terms with his digestion, betook himself to a gymnasium, where he was in the habit of counteracting the lack of exercise by dumb-bell practice.

It was on a fine spring morning that Mr. Dexter left Euston Station for Chester by the Irish Mail. Railway carriages in the year 1854 were not so large and luxurious as they are now, and Mr. Dexter was fastidious ; so he carefully scanned the long line of the train before he deposited himself, with his back to the engine, in a corner seat of a first-class compartment in which but one other place was bespoken. The corner seat opposite to Mr.

Dexter's was occupied by a neatly rolled black woollen shawl, a book, and a small umbrella. Mr. Dexter settled his rug, laid his newspapers beside him, adjusted his travelling cap, and gave himself up to contemplating the arrivals, the growing haste, and the general fuss attending the starting of a train, with the lazy self-approving complacency that comes of being in ample time and removed from every cause of flurry. There was in the scene nothing unfamiliar to him, but it amused him—the sense of change is always something to a monotonously busy man—and time was all but up ere he observed that the compartment in which he was seated seemed likely to have no other occupant. The owner of the shawl, the book, and the umbrella did not appear, and Mr. Dexter had just leaned out of the window on his side to call the attention of the guard to this fact, when a lady accompanied by a porter came along the platform at a rapid pace and approached the carriage. Mr. Dexter drew back

as the porter turned the door handle, and had just time to think what a sweet-looking girl his fellow-traveller was, when she stepped up on the footboard, and saying, 'I beg your pardon,' snatched up her portable property, and ran along the train to a compartment lower down. Mr. Dexter was ridiculously disconcerted by this trivial incident, and showed his feelings so plainly in his face, that the intelligent porter ran on for a few steps, with his hand upon the door, as the train moved slowly past the platform, while he said: 'Lady had second-class ticket, sir; mistook the carriage.' The train glided on, Mr. Dexter nodded to the man, and sat back in his corner with a feeling of relief.

'I'm glad it wasn't I that frightened her away,' he thought, 'and I hope she has got into good company.' Then he read his morning paper, dozed, looked out at the beautiful country through which he was passing—growing more beautiful as the sun rose higher and

the gladness of the spring revealed itself—resolved that he would not think of anything but the scene before his eyes ; by degrees found his thoughts getting into the accustomed office groove, and finally, long before the stop at Rugby, had dived into his bag, and was deep in ‘business.’ The train was within half an hour of Chester, when Mr. Dexter observed an ivory paper-knife lying on the floor of the carriage. He concluded it had fallen out of the book that had lain upon the opposite seat, picked it up, and resolved to look for the lady of whom he had caught so brief a glimpse, on arriving at the next stopping-place. Probably she was going on to Holyhead ; if she stepped out on the platform at Chester he should recognise her ; if she did not, he would look for her in the train.

Holding the paper-knife conspicuously, Mr. Dexter alighted on the platform at Chester, and immediately perceived that the lady for whom he was looking had done the same. As

he approached, he heard her direct a porter to take her luggage out of the van.

‘Pardon me,’ said Mr. Dexter, ‘I think this must belong to you. I picked it up in the carriage you left.’

‘Oh, thank you, it is mine,’ said the lady, taking the paper-knife from his hand, and placing it between the leaves of her book; ‘I was so sorry when I thought I had lost it.’

‘Then I am very glad to have found it.’ For a confirmed bachelor of fifty, Mr. Dexter’s politeness, without a trace of gallantry in it, was remarkably well done, as he added :—

‘Can I be of any use to you? Have you reached your destination?’

‘Yes, I leave the train here.’

She was, as Mr. Dexter had pronounced her in his thoughts, very sweet-looking, and her manner was simple and modest. She had spoken only a few most ordinary words, she had smiled, very slightly, with the pleasure of recovering the valueless article by which she

evidently set some store of association ; these were small indications, and Mr. Dexter was a cautious man ; but he was thinking at that moment, ' If she is as sweet as she looks, what a nice sort of a girl she would be to have for a daughter.' The usual bustle was going on, and as the lady looked about her rather wistfully, Mr. Dexter repeated his question :—

' Can I be of any use to you ? May I see to your luggage ?'

' A porter has gone to get it out of the train,' she said. ' I am very much obliged to you, sir, but I am expecting my father. I thought he would have been on the platform.'

She did not say this fretfully, or with any of the flurry of a young traveller ; she said it patiently, and she stood quietly, although the crowd was now dispersing. The next moment, the man whom she had sent for her luggage trundled it up to the spot, and asked what was to be done with it.

' I—I don't know,' she said, now looking

embarrassed ; 'I had better remain here. Pray do not wait,' turning to Mr. Dexter ; ' my father will come or send some one presently.'

'Can't leave luggage on the platform, Miss, it ain't allowed—take you to the Ladies' Waiting Room,' said the porter. This was clearly the best thing to be done ; the lady bowed to Mr. Dexter, and followed the truck as it went screeching across the footway, in the direction of the dreary wastes that in those days awaited travellers detained at the Chester station.

Mr. Dexter looked after the lady, noting her erect carriage and her steady, graceful gait, until he was recalled to a recollection of his own business by the man who had taken charge of his valise during this time, and whom he now directed to procure a carriage for him.

'With a good horse,' added Mr. Dexter ; 'I want to go to Bassett. You will find me in the Refreshment Room.'

Having eaten a biscuit and drunk a glass

of ale—these things he justly regarded as the only safe resources of the Refreshment Room—Mr. Dexter was wending his way to the vehicle he had ordered, when he again caught sight of the lady. She was just disappearing through the exit doors, and she was no longer alone. A tall, stout, rough-looking man walked by her side, but he had not relieved her of her book or her shawl.

‘Her father has turned up, then. I am glad of it; but I wonder who he is. Not a gentleman, certainly; and she is just as certainly a lady.’

The carriage, a lumbering ‘fly,’ drawn by a horse, sturdy and well-to-do, but with an ungroomed look which at that time nobody in those parts used to mind, was drawn up at the station gate; in its rear was a ‘round car,’ of the old-established Welsh pattern, with a dumpy boy in the driving-seat. The youth’s hard cheeks, the red in them as well-defined as a square of black or white in a chess-board, his

beady black eyes, and harsh black hair, proclaimed his nationality. Any one would have called him Jones, or Williams, or both, at a glance. As a matter of fact his name was Reuben Jones. This youth was looking straight before him at nothing, and stolidly eating his way through an enormous hunch of bread and cheese. From neither of these occupations did he desist while his master shoved, rather than handed the young lady into the uncouth vehicle, and assisted the railway porter to hoist over the side of the car a large black box, too wide to go in at the door, and to set it up on end within. He was ultimately roused to participation in what was passing, by his master's giving him a rap on the head as he asked him 'why the devil he did not catch hold of the carpet-bag?' To this the boy made a practical but voiceless reply by cramming the article in question under his feet, and, having just glanced round to see that his freight was seated, he 'chucked' the reins,

and the round car rumbled off over the stones of Chester.

‘Dexter, eh?’ said the owner of the round car to himself—he had read the name on the traveller’s neat valise, as he passed the carriage. ‘Dexter, eh? That’s the lawyer—and he’s going to Bassett. Belike there’s something wrong with the Squire.’

* * * * *

About five miles from the ancient city of Chester, and at the date of this story just that distance out of railway reach, lies the small and pretty village of Bassett. Concerning Bassett, no sanitary horrors had been discovered in 1854; it had not been pronounced by the Inspectors of anything or the Board of anywhere to be a whited, or rather a red-and-whited, sepulchre, with disease growing in its garden plots, and death on tap in its water supply. It was a passably ignorant village, even judged by the standard of thirty years ago. What would be thought of it in these days of the rule

of the School Board, no one who was really fond of the place would like to picture to his or her mind's eye. And yet, somehow or other, Bassett was a happy village in those old times. There was not a great deal of wealth, but neither was there very grinding poverty in the place. The smaller land-owners in the neighbourhood were of the stay-at-home order, and a good deal of comfort, arising from continuous employment, not too badly paid, and supplemented by personal supervision and kindly help from the better-off people who knew all about its needs, was the result of that unfashionable tendency. It was all wrong, possibly, from the philosophical and politico-economical point of view. To the advanced thinker who does not care for 'the individual,' there would probably have been discouragement in the stagnant content of Bassett. In the vicinity of such great centres of Industry too! Why, one of the sights of Bassett was the furnace flames to be seen at night from the great Deeside 'Works.' They

were, however, dull creatures at Bassett, agricultural in their ways—a little too beery, perhaps, for the ideal—and decided optimists, without having the slightest idea of what optimism meant. Perhaps, however, your real optimist never has any such idea; for if there be anything to cure one expeditiously and radically of that mood it is the analysing of it.

Bassett was given to dissent in religion, but the living was held by a wealthy man who was a good deal away for his health, and who gave largely without distinction of 'church' or 'chapel.' Of the three estates contiguous to the village of Bassett, the smallest was the most ancient and long-descended. The Earl of Dee and Sir Henry Trescoe were very much bigger men than Squire Bassett, but they were comparatively modern, whereas it was a moot question whether a remote Bassett had given his name to the village that had borne it for centuries, or the village had given its name to a family whose origin was lost in the mists

of antiquity. That there never had been a time when there was not a Bassett of Bassett was an article of faith in the place; that there ever could come a time when some one known as 'the Squire' would not inhabit the old house on the hill, with its forest of curved and twisted chimneys, and its countless windows, whose shining when the sun was westering was 'a sight,' was an idea too large and fatal to be grasped by the village mind.

That time had not come yet, at all events, for the Squire is a well preserved and, for all that appearances tell the observer, a prosperous gentleman. We find him on the garden terrace at the back of his ancient red and white house—to which it would be idle to assign a style of architecture, for it has been picturesquely patched ever since it was first built. Whatever may be the news that Mr. Dexter is bringing him, no prevision of it is disturbing him now, as he walks to and fro on the wide red-brick terrace, with a broad flight of shallow steps

leading to the vast garden, famous throughout Cheshire for its roses. The Squire looks for a splendid blow this year. Three men are now at work about midway in that great space, and a neat cart, drawn by a donkey who knows and loves the Squire, and has a good time of it if ever donkey had, is in attendance for the removal of weeds. The Squire is what Miss Nestle, the housekeeper, calls '*that* particular about weeds, he will not have them if it was ever so'—a phrase which commends itself to Miss Nestle as of conclusive force and meaning. It is true that the Squire is very particular about his garden, and that it is a source of great pleasure to him. He has just returned from superintending the operations going on below, and having a friendly talk with Jacob the donkey, and he is thinking, while he walks upon the garden terrace, about a certain letter which he has to write to-day or to-morrow—it will be as well to do it to-day.

The letter which Squire Bassett is composing

in his mind, here rejecting a phrase, and there extenuating an expression, is to be addressed to his son, John Bassett—commonly, indeed universally, known as Jack—to whom he has never in his life said a harsh word, or indited a severe epistle. The Squire has no intention of writing severely to Jack at present ; he means to write gravely, but not severely. There are reasons why he should do this, but they have partly originated in his own fault. His son could not have known what he had never been told, and, now that he has to be warned against a tendency to extravagance, the Squire's warning must not take the form of blame.

The spring day had brightened to a wondrous loveliness. A light delicious wind stirred the tender green leaves, and sent beautiful ripples over the grass and flower-beds ; the small white clouds—not the piled-up silver mounds of summer, but the downy feathers of spring, like angels' wings in the celestial

moulting time—floated under the blue dome of the sky ; the twittering of birds tuning up for evening lent its indescribable charm to the scene. The house was built upon the only eminence in the demesne, a gentle hill, open at the back and front, but well-wooded at either side ; and how it had come to be set in such a situation, being of the age it was, no one could explain ; for the great houses all around were built in hollows, and only Bassett stood like a beacon on a hill. The irregular pile of building, which had received no additions for half a century, was roomy and commodious, but not grand, and a great part of the house was unoccupied. Not for that reason was it untended, however. Any profane person who should have ventured to suggest ‘ flue ’ in the unused rooms, or to suppose it would take some time to get them ready ‘ for staying company,’ would have received a lesson from Miss Nestle such as he must have had a short memory indeed to forget. The favourite rooms of the solitary

master of the house—for the Squire and his son were alone in the world, and Jack had been but little at home lately—were those that opened on the garden terrace; the great drawing-rooms he rarely visited and never used. In the hall or saloon stood a billiard-table with bulky brass-adorned legs, uncovered only when Jack came home and ‘turned the house out of windows,’ as Miss Nestle, who perfectly worshipped him, expressed it. Behind the saloon lay the garden-terrace rooms.

The pleasantest of these was the Squire’s reading and writing-room. He would have called the apartment his library, only that to do so would have grieved Miss Nestle to the soul; for was not the real library, the old library, the family library, lined with locked bookcases containing innumerable books, correctly situated alongside of the great dining-room on the left of the saloon, and opposite to the drawing-rooms on the right? And was it not the joy and solace of Miss Nestle’s existence

that in this portion of the house at least everything had its proper place, and was always kept in it?

So that the Squire had the books he wanted about him, and the books he did not want were safe in their shelves, he did not care what the room in which he chiefly lived was called. It was light, lofty, pleasant, with old-fashioned furniture, such as we were wont to despise 'in the days that were earlier' of this century, but are content to pay smart prices for in our own. The lofty windows were hung with curtains of crimson satin damask that in its time had been gorgeous, and still was rich, but its full tint had faded to a subdued aspect that went well with the sombre carpet and the dark oak furniture. There were no nicknacks in the Squire's favourite room. A bronze timepiece, flanked by candelabra of classical design, ornamented the high, narrow white marble mantelpiece with fluted jambs inlaid with red, and a florid frontal of allegorical sculpture. There were

books everywhere, not only where they ought, but where Miss Nestle held that they ought not, to be—on this point she carried on a covert warfare with the Squire—a number of maps, several portfolios of engravings, and on the large writing-table, placed near the glass door opening on the terrace, there invariably stood a bowl—a rich and rare specimen of the old Crown Derby that is the cheerfulest of china—filled with freshly cut flowers. If a man's character is to be told by his surroundings, Squire Bassett was one whose tastes were at once studious and simple: those of a scholar and a gentleman.

Turning from his dwelling to his external self, let us see what is the aspect of this Squire Bassett, who, be his future what it may, will never again be quite the same as he who walks to and fro in a scene which might form a nook in the earthly paradise of any not altogether unreasonable dreams, on this day, so radiant with the beauty and poetical with the

promise of the spring. Good or evil, or good and evil, may be before the Squire ; but never more the actual condition of things. That is passing away, even as he pauses to observe the beautiful light upon the spread tail of a gorgeous peacock waiting for him to come and scratch its glistening green and purple poll, before it mincingly descends the steps, and walks on the velvet sward, like a court lady trailing a bedizened train.

The Squire is a slenderly built, erect, spare man ; he carries his fifty years easily. His movements are free, his tread is light, although it is slow ; his eyes are bright, although the lines under them and the creases in the upper eyelids are deep, and they retain their colour to a degree very rare at his age. That colour is the clear, somewhat cold, fearless blue that lends to the eyes of a man the most masterful language ever spoken without words. His face is thin, finely formed, handsomer than when it was younger ; its expression is thoughtful,

absent ; that of a man who is accustomed to be much alone, and apt to awake with some discomfiture to the consciousness that he is not always so. His smile is rare, but sweet, seldom passing the eyes, but playing pleasantly in them. The Squire wears a full beard, the brown in it is streaked with grey, as his hair, which is very fine, is also. A capable, amiable man, young in all ways for his age : such would be the impression made by Squire Bassett to-day upon any attentive observer.

CHAPTER II.

MR. DEXTER'S BUSINESS.

THE afternoon is wearing away, when the Squire looks at his watch and says to himself: 'I must go and write that letter.' As he turns in from the terrace through the glass door of the book-room, his quick ear catches the sound of wheels in the avenue. Then comes the clang of the door-bell, and presently Mr. Dexter is announced.

Surprise, but no alarm, is in the Squire's face as he warmly welcomes his friend. This lasts, however, only a moment, for Mr. Dexter's is an expressive countenance. Then the Squire, who has turned pale, says: 'You have come to tell me bad news, Dexter—Is it, is it Jack?'

‘No, no ; there’s nothing wrong with your son.’

‘Thank God ! What is it, then ?’ His colour has come back, and his voice is clear.

‘Only business ; but as it is complicated, and this is the end of the week, I thought I would rather come and talk it over with you.’

‘That was just like you, Dexter. You have to deal me a blow of some kind, and you come to help me to bear it. Another chapter in the history of many years, old friend. And now’ —the Squire laid his hand on Mr. Dexter’s left shoulder, and, standing very upright, looked him straight in the face—‘is it the end of that other old story ?’

‘No, no, not at all. I have heard nothing whatever. My errand is, in one sense, more serious than anything I could have to tell you on that score. In a word, Squire, we have lost our case.’

‘Indeed ! That’s bad.’

The Squire gently pushed Mr. Dexter into a

chair and took a seat himself with great composure. Nevertheless he had said the exact truth—his friend had dealt him a blow: different men have, however, different ways, not only of bearing, but of estimating blows.

‘It is very bad. I have been afraid of this result for some time; it is now certain.’

‘I suppose,’ said the Squire, with a smile, ‘we leave the Court without the slightest imputation on our character?’

‘Of course, of course. Indeed, every one concerned all round is proved to have acted from the most exemplary motives, although, I am bound to admit, with stupendous indifference to the technicalities of the Law of Trusts. Never was there a more vexatious case, within my knowledge, or more serious results from the very best intentions.’

The Squire’s face grew more grave while Mr. Dexter was speaking, and he fixed his eyes moodily upon the ground.

‘I ought to have been better prepared in

every way to meet this issue,' he said, after a short pause; 'it is one of the evils of such long-drawn suspense that one grows careless and over-bold. However,' he roused himself, and again he smiled, 'we can discuss all this by-and-by, when you have rested and refreshed yourself. I will take you to your room now.'

'I hope Miss Nestle will forgive me for arriving in this unceremonious fashion, without notice.'

'She would be less likely to forgive you for supposing it could make any difference whether you gave a week's notice, or arrived as you have done. Miss Nestle's ready guest-chamber is as much of an institution as Napoleon's roast fowl, or George III.'s cherry tart.'

Thus reassuring his guest, the Squire conducted him to a room situated above that in which he had received him, and remarking that he should be found in the book-room, and that dinner hour was half-past six, withdrew.

The quarters assigned to Mr. Dexter amply

justified the confidence with which the Squire had taken his guest to them without asking a question. They consisted of a bedroom and dressing-room, both commanding the garden view ; well lighted, airy rooms, in such perfect order as might have daunted the soul of the untidiest of men, and pervaded by the delicious odour of lavender and rosemary. On a certain day in the early spring of each year, Miss Nestle 'changed her bedrooms,' that is, their draperies ; tasselled snow-white dimity window-hangings, bed curtains, coverlets, and 'furniture' took the place of the winter plenishing, which, though very comfortable, was not æsthetic, being indeed that combination of drab moreen with black stamped-velvet bordering, which was perhaps the ugliest 'composition' ever achieved by the upholstery of the past. Mr. Dexter had come in for the dimity and missed the moreen, and, though he was troubled, he could enjoy the delightful freshness of the room, the beauty of the terrace and garden, and that of the woodland

that inclosed them. After Lincoln's Inn and Taviton Street these things could hardly fail to please, no matter how much might be amiss with other people's affairs, or, indeed, with one's own, short of any of those overwhelming griefs that reduce all places under the sun to an equal monotony of misery.

Mr. Dexter was in no hurry to rejoin his host. The inevitable blow had been dealt; it would be well that the Squire should have time to recover from it, perhaps even to relax in solitude the restraint that he had put upon himself in his manner of receiving it. There was a great deal to talk over and arrange, but they would have time for that to-night, and all to-morrow. So Mr. Dexter changed his travelling suit for the correct evening clothes of the period, in a slow and deliberate manner, with many pauses to look out of window, and a few to inspect the art ornaments over the mantelpiece and on the walls. These also were of an old-fashioned kind, and included specimens of

sampler-work in fine silks and hair, such as are hardly to be seen now except in museums.

Notwithstanding his delay and desultoriness, Mr. Dexter's mind was not in reality straying from the business that had brought him to Bassett. He was going over all the points which he meant to make, when the serious hour of consultation should have struck, and weighing the for and against of a certain line of suggestion that had presented itself to him during his journey. It was clear that the suggestion of which he was thinking would have to be offered or reserved, according to whether he should find the Squire amenable to his (Mr. Dexter's) view of the situation and its requirements, or bent upon one of his own which might differ widely from that of his legal adviser. The sun went down with great pomp while Mr. Dexter was making his toilet and his reflections, and when he entered the book-room he found another of Miss Nestle's inexorable laws in operation. Shutters were closed, cur-

tains were drawn, candles were lighted, and a small bright fire of well-seasoned wood cut into well-proportioned logs was burning on the hearth, guarded by a brazen rail, and dogs with the ever-reflective head and firmly-posed paws of a pair of sphinxes.

‘No half-lights for me,’ Miss Nestle would say; ‘they’re only excuses for idling, and if you want to eat and drink, nothing can be more uncomfortable.’ Happily, the Squire was also of Miss Nestle’s opinion.

By tacit consent Mr. Bassett and his guest made no reference to the matter in the minds of both until they had dined: not in the large and necessarily dreary room on the left of the saloon—it was a world too wide for two elderly gentlemen—but in a snug apartment adjoining the book-room, and forming the last of the Squire’s ‘own’ suite on the garden terrace.

If the hard-to-be-defined quality of true-blueness includes the faculty of putting other people at their ease, however little one’s own

mood may resemble that pleasant state, Squire Bassett was undeniably of the number of the true-blue. He was an attentive host, and a pleasant talker ; a man of the world, notwithstanding the voluntary remoteness of his ordinary life from centres of action ; one to whom no subjects of general interest were unfamiliar. He was not only a good talker, he was also a good listener ; one who gave his interlocutor a fair chance, treating his opinions with respect, even when they were most antagonistic, and readily receiving ideas, which he would frequently restore to their originator enriched by his own knowledge, and adorned by his own taste.

It was neither purely good manners nor the least touch of dissimulation that made the Squire wear an untroubled aspect while eating a tolerably good dinner himself, and seeing that his friend ate a very good one : it was the simple courageousness of his nature.

When they had dined, the friends returned

to the bookroom, and there, in a scene which would have conveyed to a casual observer an impression of tranquillity, permanence, ease without vulgar luxury, and entire security, they discussed in all its bearings a misfortune whose first and immediate result must be the vanishing away of all this.

With the cause and progress of the lawsuit that had been for years a never-removed though only intermittently irritating source of trouble and anxiety to Squire Bassett, this story has nothing to do. The affair had been, in the beginning, one of trust, but it had accreted so many extraneous matters, that it would have puzzled all the parties to it, and the Squire in particular, to define it in its present and final shape. It might have served as a type for the celebrated suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in complication, if not in duration; but now this was all over; the long-delayed decision had been arrived at with a rush in the end. The clear conviction of every one concerned, that

it was very hard, and that the losing side—Squire Bassett—had never had any intention of doing the smallest wrong in his action on behalf of the winning party many years before, had exercised no influence upon the event.

Mr. Dexter arranged his papers on the table before him, and went into the subject with regularity and method, having admitted that the case had ‘doubled upon him’ in an unexpected and surprising way. He earnestly represented to his client that the decision was not to be reversed, and any future action or appeal would only throw away more good money after the large sums which had already followed the bad money that was the root of the matter.

The Squire listened with intelligent patience, and read, or at least looked at, a number of papers handed to him in succession by Mr. Dexter. He was docile, for he knew that the business habits of his trusty friend would not be content with any smaller concession. When

he had read the last of these depressing but convincing documents, he pushed his hair off his forehead with a sigh of relief, and expressed himself as entirely 'satisfied.' This was an odd word to use, but Mr. Dexter let it pass, and replaced the papers in his bag with a melancholy air.

'This defeat means something very like ruin, Dexter,' said the Squire, as he turned from the table and the lights, and, bending forward with a slight shiver, spread his hands out to catch the warmth of the wood fire. 'You know all concerning me and my affairs so thoroughly, I do not need to tell you that. The sum to be refunded, and the costs of these later proceedings, will oblige me to begin all over again on a very small scale. Well, so be it; my time will not be very long, my wants need not be very many; such of my tastes as are costly must be given up. Perhaps all that I value most in my own life and condition will be found to suffer but little change. We shall

see about that when we go into figures to-morrow. But, Dexter'—here the Squire turned his head sharply round, with a look of pain, towards Mr. Dexter at the table—'the pinch of it is—Jack!'

'Yes, I thought so. That has been very much on my mind. Yes,' repeated Mr. Dexter, with the same characteristic short shake of the head that had registered his silent dissent from Mr. Norris's remark upon the advantages of a run in the country; 'the pinch of it undoubtedly is your son.'

'Such a disappointment as the interruption, indeed the entire abandonment, of his proposed career, just at this time too, when what these young fellows call "chances" are so likely to turn up, will have a bad effect on Jack.'

'He has not been prepared for such a termination to the suit, then?'

'He has known but little about it, and he has, I fancy, thought much less. I dare say I have not been wise, but I have always wanted

to keep that soul-killer, worry, out of the boy's way. One does so long to let them have their youth all that youth ought to be—especially if one's own has left a good deal to be desired in more ways than one. Latterly I have begun to doubt the prudence of this, and to think that the “forewarned, forearmed” theory might have been a sounder one to act on in Jack's case. And now I know it would. He will be terribly hard hit. There is an immovable tenacity about him which may be a very valuable quality, but it will make this all the more hard for him to bear.’

Mr. Dexter looked grave. He could not honestly say that he did think the Squire had been wise in his method of treating the young gentleman, whose character he took to be self-willed and obstinate—for that was how he interpreted the ‘valuable quality’ of which Jack's father was plainly afraid. So he asked a not strictly relevant question:—

‘Have you recent news of him?’

‘I have’—again the Squire turned sharply towards the speaker, with a look of pain—‘and not the best news. He has been working well—that’s all right—but he has taken an extravagant turn, and, in fact, I have been troubled in mind of late about this very thing.’

‘He will have to pull up now,’ said the lawyer.

The morning hymn of the birds awoke Mr. Dexter on the following morning earlier than he was accustomed to be aroused by the familiar sounds of life in Taviton Street. He dressed expeditiously, and went out on the garden-terrace to enjoy the freshness and beauty of the scene. The added stillness of the day of rest lent it a new charm, and, although everything had been awake long before the birds’ matins had aroused him, Mr. Dexter had all the sense of energy, virtue, and sharpened observation that we derive from the consciousness that we are about

when nobody else is stirring, and the belief that we are finding nature at her morning toilet.

Mr. Dexter descended into the garden, and had roamed about it for some time before the Squire came out to look for him. When at length he was joined by the owner of all the peaceful loveliness that brought such welcome refreshment to the soul of the visitor, Mr. Dexter was about to give expression to his pleasure ; but it was smitten into silence by the remembrance of the sentence of loss and change passed upon that fair possession.

The Squire had slept but little, nevertheless he met the eye of the morning that had risen to find him so different from what he had been yesterday, with strength and serenity, and the grave lines in his face were not those of repining. No trouble, he thought, was unbearable that had not any element of self-reproach in it ; in his great trouble there was none. The pair of friends went into the house together ; they

found their breakfast ready, and a batch of newspapers and letters on the table.

‘From Jack,’ said the Squire, taking up a letter, and handing a newspaper to his guest.

The letter consisted of a few lines, by which Squire Bassett’s son informed him that he expected to get home by the end of the week ; and that the ‘bigwigs’ were quite satisfied with him. The meaning of this was that Jack Bassett had passed with credit the Sandhurst examination. This was not a deed of any great emprise in pre-Crimean days ; but it meant ‘all they knew’ at that time, in which, nevertheless, some good soldiers were made. The Squire was pleased with the news, but it was with a rueful smile that he handed over Jack’s letter for Mr. Dexter’s perusal, and said :—

‘He will be terribly cut up when he finds all this has to go for nothing. I cannot think how I shall answer his letter. It will be so hard to tell him that he must give up his hopes of being a Light Dragoon.’

‘I suppose that would mean a good deal of money both at the start and afterwards. You know how profound is my ignorance of military matters ; I have only a general notion that a commission in a cavalry regiment is a whistle for which a big fancy price has to be paid.’

‘Jack will have to give up all idea of it. I felt very uncomfortable yesterday at having to find fault with him about some thoughtless and foolish things that he has been doing recently ; but I had made up my mind to write to him. I have too long allowed my besetting sin, procrastination, to get the better of me ; and now, a harder task lies before me.’

‘Don’t write to him at all. Let him come home, and then tell him about it. He is a manly young fellow, though an only son, and, I have no doubt, a spoilt child : depend upon it, he will take it well. A few days’ ignorance on his part will not matter, and you will have had time to think over several alternatives to the light cavalry for him.’

‘Very true,’ assented the Squire, relieved by this suggestion; ‘it will be, as you say, ever so much better that he and I should talk things over. But as for alternatives, I cannot see even one. He has never thought of himself, and I have never thought of him, as anything but a soldier.’

‘What would he say to the law?’

‘He would say “No.” Jack would never make a lawyer.’

‘To farming, then?’

‘Ah, that I cannot say. I have never known him to take an interest in anything of the kind. He is very good friends with all the people about; but I fancy that is on the ground of sporting affinities. Besides, where is the farm to be found, and the capital?’

‘H’m,’ said Mr. Dexter, shaking his head, ‘there are many difficulties in your way; and yet this is not the most imminent or pressing.’

At this point the conversation was interrupted by breakfast, and after that the friends

parted, severally to fulfil the devotional duties of the day. Squire Bassett belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, as every Bassett had always belonged to it, through all the fortunes of that Church, good, bad, or, as they were just then, middling. Mr. Dexter was a member of the Church of England, and although not strict in his attendance at public worship in London, where nobody knows and nobody cares whether anybody else goes to church, or practises 'the religion of the blue sky' at home (the religion of the blue sky was very much the fashion in those days), he would not on any account remain away from divine service in the country. It was the correct thing to go to church ; everybody did it ; he did not at all dislike conforming to the custom, and the sacred edifice looked pretty in its green old garments of ivy, on the very edge of the Squire's park.

The church was built on land which formed a portion of Sir Henry Trescoe's estate ; but it was accessible from the Bassett grounds

without resort being had to the high road. Mr. Dexter took the path across the fields. He was in ample time; the orderly and, for the size of the village, numerous, congregation was not more than half assembled. As Mr. Dexter observed its members coming in, his attention was caught by two persons who entered the church by a side door, but separated immediately, one entering a pew just behind that in which Mr. Dexter was seated, while the other walked down the aisle, and ascended the stairs leading to the uncurtained organ-gallery. The elder of the two was a delicate but good-looking woman, about thirty years of age and of a subdued and timid aspect. There was nothing in her appearance to raise her above the commonplace. If she had come into the church alone, and Mr. Dexter had observed her at all, he would hardly have thought of her as a 'lady'; but her younger companion was the undeniable 'lady' of Mr. Dexter's little adventure of the preceding day, the owner of the ivory paper-

knife. She was as plainly dressed as she had been on that occasion, and her erect graceful carriage, the firm pose of her head, and her steady, elegant gait were even more conspicuous. Her ill-assorted male companion of yesterday, presumably her father, was not present.

The pew in which Mr. Dexter was placed commanded a distinct view of the organ-gallery, and he observed that the young lady took her place with a little air of authority, which was recognised by a score of small boys cleanly and Sabbatical of aspect.

‘I hope she sings,’ said Mr. Dexter to himself; ‘she looks as if she ought to sing well.’

A few minutes set Mr. Dexter’s mind at rest upon this point. The organist came in, and took his seat; the number of the congregation was accomplished; the officiating clergyman made his appearance in the reading-desk; a bald clerk took possession of the mean little box just beneath it, with only his head showing above the ledge, and the service began with

the singing of a psalm, a fashion that in those days prevailed in churches which were not 'high.'

The psalm was that grand one, happily mated with noble and simple music, which begins with the verse :—

O God ! our help in ages past :
Our hope for years to come !
Our shelter from the stormy blast ;
And our eternal home !

The organ was a good one, and the choir was well-trained. The music, although the untaught congregation joined in the singing, was solemn and impressive, and the voice which Mr. Dexter had hoped, indeed expected, to hear, mingled with and rose above it, in pure, assured, thrilling melody, that went straight to the heart of the unemotional lawyer, and moistened his eyelids with unconscious tears. He loved music, but he seldom indulged his only artistic taste. Music did not naturally come in his way ; he did not go out of his way to look for it ; he was both too busy and too

lonely to do so. There are lives at once so full and so solitary, that the impulse to seek recreation is choked in them. Mr. Dexter's life was one of these, and this unknown young lady's singing made him suddenly aware of the fact, even while it also lifted him for the moment into the higher sphere of feeling to which the strain belonged. The ease with which the rich swelling notes were produced was as remarkable as their purity, and the perfect enunciation of the words of the psalm came to Mr. Dexter's ear as if the singer only were uttering them. As the first surprise of this delightful music subsided into an intense enjoyment of it, he looked around to see whether other people were affected by it as he was ; but there was no sympathetic pleasure to be read in any countenance. The 'good willing' among the congregation—meaning the great majority—were singing away for themselves, intent on their hymn-books ; no eyes were raised to the organ-loft. When, as the psalm

ceased, Mr. Dexter glanced at the elder lady who had come into the church with the sweet singer, he saw that she also was wholly unaffected by the music.

‘The young lady belongs to the village, and they are used to this sort of thing,’ was Mr. Dexter’s reflection, as he accepted a prayer-book offered to him, with a nudge, by his next neighbour, and wondered how many psalms were considered the correct thing for Morning Service at Bassett.

Twice again the lawyer enjoyed ‘the rapture of sweet sound,’ and when the service ended he was in no hurry to leave the church, but retained his place until the little choir had dispersed, and the singer, who had occupied more of Mr. Dexter’s attention than any young lady, not a client, had been favoured with for the last ten years of his life, came down from the gallery and joined her companion. They left the church by the door that had admitted them, and Mr. Dexter followed them into the

churchyard. A flagged passage led to the gate, and there a few groups were gathered, exchanging greetings, not too much prolonged, for dinner hour at Bassett came pretty close upon church. The fair singer and her friend were detained by some female neighbours, and as Mr. Dexter passed close by them the young lady looked round, and recognised him, after a moment's uncertainty, with a bow. He responded by raising his hat with respect as deep as ever he had shown to his most important lady-client. Mr. Dexter knew very little about saints, and, naturally, nothing at all about angels: nevertheless, as he struck into the path across the fields, he said to himself, with as much 'cock-sureness' as if he had been brought up in the society of both: 'That girl looks like a saint, and sings like an angel. I wonder who she is?'

'Has Mr. Bassett come in from church, Robert?' asked Mr. Dexter of the servant who had admitted him, as he paused in the hall to

substitute a soft hat for the regulation head-covering.

‘Yes, sir, the Squire’s been in some time.’

‘He is in the garden, I suppose, or on the terrace?’

‘No, sir; the Squire’s in the book-room. Farmer Wynn is with him.’

Mr. Dexter made his way to the garden terrace, and there established himself with a newspaper to await the departure of Farmer Wynn, and the arrival of luncheon. There was not much in the newspaper, except the usual dissertation upon the aspect of affairs in the East. Mr. Dexter was not acutely political; the day was very fine, the scene which lay before him was sufficiently lovely to induce any man not intent on sporting ‘events’ to relinquish his newspaper in favour of the face of nature. The voice of the fair singer lingered in the lawyer’s ear. He was just arranging in his mind the terms which he should employ in

describing her to Squire Bassett, so as to discover whether she was known to him, when two persons emerged from the glass door that opened from the book-room upon the terrace, and walked away towards the opposite end. One of these was Squire Bassett; the other was the man, clearly not a gentleman, whom Mr. Dexter had seen on the previous day at the Chester railway station, and whom he had taken to be the father of the fair unknown. Mr. Bassett accompanied his visitor to the end of the terrace; the latter turned off in the same direction taken by Mr. Dexter in the morning, and the Squire came slowly back along the line of the house. His face wore a pondering expression, and Mr. Dexter glanced curiously at him.

‘It’s nearly time for luncheon,’ said the Squire, looking at his watch. ‘You are only just in, I suppose. What do you think of Little Bassett Church?’

Mr. Dexter praised the sacred edifice. It

was not the Squire's 'own,' but he took a pride in everything that belonged to Bassett.

'Had you a good sermon? Mr. Colvin is considered a fair preacher, I believe.'

'I don't think I'm a judge of sermons, but I can tell you that Little Bassett may be proud of its organ, its choir, and its psalmody. I never heard a finer voice or more beautiful singing than I have heard this morning in the church there. Oddly enough, I recognised the singer. She came down in the train with me yesterday, and she was joined at Chester by the—person'—(Mr. Dexter had been about to say 'the gentleman,' but didn't) 'who has just left you.'

'What, Farmer Wynn? Oh yes, it was his daughter, no doubt. I believe she sings very well; she was brought up in London by her mother's sister. She has not been down here long. Wynn mentioned it.'

'She does not take after her father; he struck me as a coarse sort of fellow.' Mr.

Dexter had a disagreeable remembrance of the man's rough and careless manner to the girl.

‘Wynn is that ; but a shrewd, capable man. His daughter has been very little at the farm ; I don't think I have ever seen her since she was a child ; but Miss Nestle holds her in some favour, and has told me wonders of her singing. There's the gong. By the bye, it's an odd thing—the girl's mother must have had a prevision : the name of Wynn's daughter is Mavis.’

‘Mavis ?’

‘Yes. That means a thrush, you know.’

‘I did not know. A pretty name, and uncommon. She is a singing bird with a fortune in her throat, if ever there was one.’

‘It is to be hoped that no one will help her to the discovery,’ said the Squire, shortly.

As they passed through the book-room, Mr. Bassett paused at a shelf closely packed with works of travel and discovery, and took down

a few volumes. They all had reference to the Australasian world.

‘Wynn came up to ask me to lend him some books,’ the Squire explained; ‘he has a brother in Victoria—at Melbourne, I believe—and he has taken a fancy to know something about the country.’

The afternoon and evening of that day passed quietly away. In all the converse between the friends, on the business that had brought Mr. Dexter to Bassett, the lawyer was the more moved and the more perplexed of the two. Mr. Dexter was to leave Bassett on the Monday morning at an hour which would render it impossible to resume discussion with the Squire. Whatever he wanted, or had made up his mind to say, must be said before they parted for the night. Now there was one thing that Mr. Dexter did want to say to the Squire; one thing which he had turned over and over again in his imagination, putting it into a variety of potential phrases. Neverthe-

less, the limit of their time had been reached, and this one thing remained unsaid. Mr. Dexter knew perfectly well that none of his prepared potential phrases would now get themselves uttered ; but when the formal last words had been spoken, he added :—

‘I must say one word more to you. There is a way by which all this can be avoided. Think well of it, and let me take that way—for your son’s sake.’

A spasm of pain crossed the Squire’s face ; an angry light gleamed for one moment in his still clear blue eyes—a light which would not have been good to see in his youth—but he resolutely conquered the emotion that had spoken by these rebellious signs, and he answered calmly :—

‘No thinking, my dear Dexter, could induce me to adopt that way. Once more, good night.’

CHAPTER III.

COUNSELS OF THE NIGHT.

SQUIRE BASSETT'S days were well filled ; he was no idler or dreamer ; his way of life was orderly. His correspondence was punctually maintained ; the business of his estate was punctually discharged. The Squire's shortcomings occurred in the order of his social duties. He was liked and respected by his tenants and his poorer neighbours, but he was not quite so popular with those of his own class, and he was perhaps a little too indifferent to that fact. A man of station and even moderate wealth, who lives in the country, and does not care for either politics or sport, is an anomalous being. Squire Bassett was an instance of this anomaly. The influence of his

religion on his mind kept him out of active politics, in which there was little place, thirty years ago, for an English gentleman who was also a devout and consistent Roman Catholic, and whose political instincts were Conservative, although he could not fail to perceive that justice and the right were coming to professors of his faith in Great Britain and Ireland from the Liberal side exclusively. Besides, there was a strong streak of indolence in him, and this had probably as much to do with Squire Bassett's abstention from politics, as his sincere conviction of his own insignificance, and his contented reflection that the business of the nation was the affair of 'bigger' men than he. His attitude towards the present was that of a quietly observant, unexcited, but not uninterested spectator; his student tastes led him to a more close and intimate communion with the past. There was no Irish blood in Squire Bassett's veins, yet he possessed one characteristic that has been described as a special note

of the Irish temperament; the tendency to reconstruct the past in imagination, to live in thought with the past by preference. He was no recluse; he went through the ordinary routine of social intercourse, in a not very lively part of the country, with propriety; but heartiness was wanting, and the Squire, when in company, certainly did convey the idea of having come out of himself only to diminish the general ease in his vicinity. He was not really unsympathetic, and his benevolence was as practical as it was unostentatious; but it was necessary to arouse his attention in order to engage it, and absence of mind, hardly judged by those whose lives are on the surface, but surely a pardonable offence in the case of persons whose lives are for the most part solitary, militated against Mr. Bassett's popularity.

That a man who is no sportsman has no real right to live anywhere, but more especially to live near *him*, is the conviction of the man

who is all sportsman, and he more or less acknowledges it according to his degree of civilisation. Bassett was situated in a country in which hunting, fishing, and shooting were to be had under conditions favourable enough to satisfy the most exacting; but the Squire was deeply 'suspect' on all these points. Not that he had theories; he did not condemn his neighbours as immoral, or even as cruel, in their tastes and pursuits; he simply did not like 'sport.' He tolerated the dogs, the guns, and the rods which came in his way and on his land in their successive seasons, very much as he tolerated Italian-operatic singing by amateurs, or the playing of practical jokes in country-houses on rainy days. He was as incapable of understanding how hunting, shooting, and fishing could be found engrossing by rational beings, as he was of entering into the humour of practical jokes, but he was aware that he was in the minority; and so he was always polite in reference to those topics which

most effectually fire the breast in 'country parts.' At the same time he was so plainly indifferent that he was given credit for thinly veiled contempt. This was unjust to Squire Bassett: his was not a contemptuous nature at all; he did not think too highly of himself or too meanly of his neighbour: he was simply indolent, outside of his especial tastes. Indifference on points of that kind, however, rarely fails to cause dislike as surely as opposition excites a similar sentiment.

Squire Bassett's life had been for many years an uneventful one; he had held the ordering of it in his own hands, with freedom such as rarely belongs to a man who is weighted by any ties at all, and is not of a disposition to ignore or defy them. Such strength of character as was in him was latent; there had been no call for the putting forth of it in the calm, externally monotonous time that had elapsed since he succeeded his father at Bassett, and took up his residence there, with a motherless little boy of four years

old as his only companion. During all those years he had no history of the sort that those who run may read. What were the objects for which this lonely man, who had so little share in the lives of those around him, really cared? They were his Faith, his son, his books, his dependents, his flower-garden, and everything animate and inanimate within the old place.

He had been growing old contentedly enough ; things had been well with him ; there had been only Jack to think about, and his thoughts of Jack had been untroubled until quite of late. The road that lay before him to the bottom of the hill of life had seemed to be smooth, and fenced about with ease, leisure, and all old customs, until the unseen end of it, and the grateful rest.

That long unbroken peace was ended now. The sweet spring day that had brought the news to the Squire which meant calamity even to him, who looked upon what others would call ruin with a calmer gaze than most men could have

turned upon that stern and ugly visitant, was the beginning of a new era, of a fresh track in the journey downhill.

It was neither pride nor stoicism that had kept the Squire up to the point of calm and dignified acceptance of his misfortune, in the presence of his friend. He was incapable of pretence; the courage he had manifested after the first fear that harm had come to his son passed away, leaving his heart light, was simple and genuine. But the courage with which we bear our wounds is not the measure of their depth or their severity.

Squire Bassett, like many men who live for the most part alone, was in the habit of sitting up late. The tranquil and regular occupation of his days was apt to leave him with a sense that there was something special to which he must turn his attention when his rarely disturbed leisure should be more entirely secure. The small hours generally found him occupied with a chosen volume carried away from the

book-room, and seated in an ancient chintz-covered chair, roomy enough to have accommodated the Chinese giant, by the side of a wood fire, which was always kept up in his bedroom except in the dog-days.

The small hours found Squire Bassett there, and thus—long after he and Mr. Dexter had parted for the night, but the book, which from mere force of habit he had carried to his bedroom, had fallen unheeded on the floor. What had the hours brought to him? What sharp-pointed arrows, true of aim, flying only he knew whence, had pierced the steady target of his breast in the night watches?

That Squire Bassett should not have long foreseen all the results of such a termination to the lawsuit, that there should have been anything left to surprise him withal may be absurd, to the minds of those who are not accustomed to take into practical account the inconsistency of men and women, and the ease with which we get into the habit of ignoring all things un-

pleasant, and hoping all things pleasant, where we ourselves are concerned. At any rate, and however absurd the fact, it was a fact that Squire Bassett had of late got out of the way of thinking about the suit.

The last words spoken between Mr. Dexter and himself had no place in the present cogitations of the Squire. Those last words he resolutely put away from him, as he had put away the unnamed suggestion they conveyed, taking no account of them in the argument he was holding with himself. In that solitary dispute, as throughout the discussion that had taken place between himself and Mr. Dexter, his son was the chief object before his mind, the great consideration outweighing every other in the forming of a resolution which on that day had taken a new aspect not yet to be disclosed to his friend.

Memory was busy with the grave, composed, fine-looking man—he was only middle-aged a day or two ago; now they would soon begin to call him old—as busy as were vain regret and

reluctance. It would be with a desperate wrench that he should tear himself away from Bassett; and yet, if the place of his forefathers was to be preserved to his son in the future, it must be given up now. Every resource at his command would be strained to the uttermost. It would need careful management to secure a provision for Jack, while the poor disappointed young fellow should be making up his mind about a profession other than that of which he must needs abandon the hope, and for himself an income on which he should be able to live in the complete retirement that would have no terrors for him. Small liabilities, which had never troubled him previously, recurred to his mind now; these would mount up when the day of peremptory settling came. It would be a clean sweep indeed. Poor Jack! From every wandering excursion into the past, from every glance projected into the future, the Squire returned, with a sigh, to murmur those words.

His brave and cheerful statement of his own case to Mr. Dexter was quite genuine ; but when his friend's face and voice were removed, his heart sank with a womanish dread about his son. Compassion, such as mothers feel for the sorrow and disappointment of youth, came in a strong tide into the heart of this lonely man, whose only son, the pride and delight of his life, its motive and its meaning, had been motherless from his early childhood.

What if this great trouble should spoil the boy's kindly, joyous, hopeful nature ? What if Jack should bear it badly, and the seeds of bitterness be planted in him ? What if his son should blame the Squire, when he came to understand how this thing had befallen them, for that first error of judgment in which others were joined with him, but whose penalty he alone had survived to pay, and should charge him with the ruin of his hopes, and the blighting of his future ? But he would not fear this ; it would be so unlike Jack. So Squire Bassett

turned aside the point of that particular arrow by a movement of confidence, such as his son's mother might have felt towards her boy, had she ever known him.

The day had dawned before sleep came, to shield the Squire from the arrows that fly by night into the fortress that has been breached by trouble.

Mr. Dexter was up betimes, and busy with a great reinforcement of papers, which he was to take to town with him. The Squire accompanied him to the Chester railway station, and there took leave of him with his accustomed cheerfulness.

‘He’s a wonderful man,’ said Mr. Dexter to himself, as the train moved on, ‘but he looks ten years older than he looked on Saturday. And he’s as obstinate as the devil. Here I am going back without having got one word said of what would put it all right if he would only listen to reason.’

The journey of Mr. Dexter back to town

was not made under circumstances quite so pleasant as his journey down. The local paper with which he proposed to beguile the time was badly printed, and tried his sight; the compartment was filled with travellers at the first stop, and two children were of the number. Mr. Dexter was not a child-loving bachelor. The devoted mother in attendance thought it necessary to pull one of the windows up and down twenty times in an hour, according to the indicatory sneezes of her offspring. Altogether things went badly, and Mr. Dexter arrived at Euston Station—a place not calculated to restore anybody's spirits—tired and cross.

London was full of drizzling rain and drifting 'blacks'; the air was dark and clammy; it was difficult for Mr. Dexter to realise that only a few hours ago he had left behind him such a scene as the terrace and flower-garden at Bassett. Mr. Dexter was dissatisfied with himself, and external things aided his discontent. The comfort and orderliness of his own

house, dingy and heavily furnished as it was, and lacking all those small arrangements and adornments that tell of the presence of women other than domestics, were grateful to the discomfited lawyer. His dinner, well cooked and served, was ready for him so soon as he was ready for it, and at its conclusion he was almost restored to his customary condition of charity with himself, and with mankind in general. The toothache, which he felt sure he was going to have, in consequence of the fluctuations of the railway-carriage window, had not developed itself. The cheery fire, and the light of wax candles reflected in the dark brightness of the polished mahogany, were very pleasant, and the double-shelved waggon on casters, on which Mr. Dexter's business papers were symmetrically laid out, promised a goodly amount of occupation for the evening.

The waggon was wheeled to the side of Mr. Dexter's easy chair, and he was left to the discussion of his port and his papers. He

enjoyed the prospect, as a different sort of man might enjoy being rid of business until the next day, for he loved his work. Not only its larger processes, its successes, its results, and the profits that accrued from them—although Mr. Dexter was passably fond of money—but its details, its minutiae, the cautious handling sometimes ungenerously lumped in with practices that are contemptuously stigmatised as ‘pettifogging,’ and all the ingenuities and formalities of legal procedure. There was, in fact, nothing connected with the routine and practice of his profession which was wearisome to Mr. Dexter; there was nothing that he would have had abolished, except, perhaps, the Long Vacation. If his mind with respect to that institution could have been got at, he would probably have been found to regard it as a deplorable concession to the Bar.

At Mr. Dexter's right hand stood the waggon; on the table by his left elbow were laid some newspapers, the *Times* uppermost. Con-

spicuous among the papers on the top shelf of the waggon was a letter without a postage stamp.

‘Norris’s report,’ said Mr. Dexter to himself, as he struck the envelope open with his eye-glass.

The memorandum was brief: ‘M. Reveillon, from Paris, called on Saturday. He wishes to see you without delay, and will call again on Tuesday at 11 A.M.’

‘M. Reveillon, from Paris,’ repeated Mr. Dexter; ‘I had forgotten the name. I wonder what his errand is. Whatever it may be, I am all the more sorry that I could not make the Squire listen to what I had to say.’

Then Mr. Dexter delivered himself up to the *Times*. He was a methodical and catholic-minded reader, he never skimmed, and in most public matters he took a lively interest. Those which concerned the empire of France possessed but slender attraction for Mr. Dexter; he might have left that department of knowledge unex-

plored, had not the aspect of Eastern affairs, and the prospect that the 'entente cordiale' between France and England was to mean much more than an interchange of commercial treaties and diplomatic courtesies, lent increased importance to the Paris correspondence of the *Times*. So Mr. Dexter read the news from France, and presently came upon the following passage :

'The death of M. D'Esterres, the well-known collector of pictures and objects of art, which took place on the 20th ultimo, throws a quantity of bric-à-brac on the market, and has caused a fluttering among the rival dealers and collectors. According to the instructions of the will of M. D'Esterres, which was made sixteen years ago, a sale of the collections is to take place at the hôtel in the Marais, where he lived for half a century. The date of the sale is not yet announced, but the catalogue-makers are hard at work. It is said that the Empress is anxious to secure several articles which

formerly belonged to the unfortunate Queen Marie Antoinette, and were especially prized by M. D'Esterres.'

'Sixteen years ago, ' said Mr. Dexter, as he laid the newspaper on his knee, and polished his glasses with his handkerchief; 'it is then the old will, the first will, unchanged. It must be a large fortune by this time, for, even buying rubbish as he did, M. D'Esterres could not have spent two-thirds of his income. I wonder what the figure amounts to by this time: very likely it will be given with the details of the sale.'

This item of Parisian news was seemingly a fruitful source of reflection to Mr. Dexter, for he did not resume his reading of the newspaper for several minutes, and before he went to work at his papers he cut the paragraph relating to the death of M. D'Esterres out of the *Times*, and placed it carefully in his pocket-book.

CHAPTER IV.

FIELD-FLOWER FARM.

THERE was not a spot in all Cheshire more rich in wild flowers—those

‘Treasures that fall alike to all,
Type of the promised Heaven,’—

than the farm occupied by David Wynn. It formed a portion of the Bassett estate, and had been named in days long past Field-flower Farm. The farm boasted of a history; for the dwelling-house, an object so picturesque that more than one artist of repute had taken its portrait, had once been a fortress. That was in the time of the Welsh wars; it had been turned into a dower-house at a much later period, when the wealthy and childless widow of the Bassett of that day retired into

it from the then newly-built mansion in the park, which passed into the possession of her deceased husband's brother. Dame Dorothy Bassett set about making improvements in her new abode, in a modernising direction; but they were suspended by her second marriage, when she transferred herself and her fortune to other climes, and the dower-house declined upon a lower level of destiny. The moat had been filled up half a century before Dame Dorothy's time: sheer from the smooth green sward, which for ages had hidden the old pavement of the courtyard beneath it, rose the grey, lichen-grown walls of the house, with its long narrow casements of lozenge-shaped panes of glass set in lead, its sturdy buttress, and its ruined tower, on whose summit a profusion of greenery, sprouting from the ruins, made a well-like bower, accessible from a rough stair.

The ancient arched gateway had long been built up, and the stones that filled the space

were dotted with grey, red, and yellow growths ; the chains of the old portcullis still hung, rust-eaten, on either side of the arch, and an extensive fragment of the external wall pushed up its grey head between the stretch of bright green grass that marked the site of the old moat, and a thriving coppice of young oaks, with a fine fringe of graceful larches, which shut out the homely and material aspects of the farm. A narrow gate in this fragment of the old wall gave admittance to the wide grass plat and the flower beds, and a path led to a door in that part of the house-wall which formed an angle with the ruined tower. There was nothing on the western side to indicate that the old place was a farmhouse ; the haggarts, lofts, stables, cowhouses, piggeries, &c., were on the opposite side, and thence the farm land stretched away to a distance that indicated Farmer Wynn as a ' warm ' man. From the upper range of the long, narrow, irregular windows on ' the Dame's parlour-side '—so

called for a century past—a very pretty bit of landscape was visible ; the ground dipped suddenly and steeply beyond the oak and larch coppice, to the bank of a swift stream which ran merrily, between willows and alders, to join the Dee near the ancient city of Chester. On the other side of it were widespread meadows extending to the high road that passed over an old bridge half a mile from the farm. From the gate in the old wall already mentioned, a path, cut through the coppice to the water's edge, led to a substantial summer-house, with a penthouse roof on the river side of it, which afforded shelter to a boat.

The entrance to Field-flower Farm was modern and ugly, though redeemed to some extent by the fine avenue of trees that divided it from the high road ; but the peculiarity of the house was the distinct character of its western side. Whitewashed walls, windows set in black wooden frames,

flagged passages, and common staircases, were on the farm side, which was connected with the other by a vaulted passage, panelled and ceiled with carved oak, and by carved doors that swung heavily back into recesses in the thick walls of the rooms, three on each floor.

The furniture of the Dame's parlour-side partook of the mixed character of the house, but the old fashion preponderated; for the rooms were rarely used by any inmate of Field-flower Farm. Wynn despised the old 'rubbish,' and none of his neighbours would have dissented from his opinion had he deigned to consult theirs. In those days no revival of taste had taken place; spindle-shanked chairs and tables were not more highly esteemed than were the wan and the limp among human beings.

The walls, which were very thick, had been covered in, by the care of Dame Dorothy, with canvas stretched on stout wooden frames, and hung with old tapestry, chiefly

representing hunting scenes, but varied by a Nativity above the lofty carved chimney-piece at the end of the suite of three rooms that formed the ground floor, and communicated with each other and with the corridor. The spaces between and above the long small-paned windows, with clumsy latches and hasps to fasten them back to the outer wall, were also filled up with tapestry; on three sides of the room stretched a deep surbase of carved oak, with window-seats of the same. On these lay cushions of faded moreen—waifs and strays from the old church pews. The ceiling was also of carved oak, and its design converged in the centre into the blazoned lozenge of that Dame Dorothy Bassett who had set her mark on the old place.

It was no admiration of them, but the simple consideration of utility, that had led to the stripping of the 'Dame's side' of several of the old 'pieces' and their transfer to the

‘Farm-side,’ with the result of rendering the prevailing medley more incongruous. There remained, however, a couple of fine carved cabinets, a ‘secretary’ of some rare black wood with richly wrought brass handles and locks, a well-worn Turkey carpet, half a dozen ancient chairs, with initials and dates upon them that assigned a century of existence to the newest. A gigantic hour-glass in an ebony frame, with a pair of feather wings laden with undisturbed dust, fitted into a niche in the tapestry over the central door, and in a corner, by the great chimney-piece, its graceful cut of flax grey with age, stood an ancient spinning-wheel, silent since its last owner’s thread of life had been severed by the Fates’ unhesitating shears.

The solemn air of unused rooms, which in their time have witnessed all the scenes in the drama of human life, pervaded these; but it was relieved by the entrance of fresh air and sunshine through the lifted window frames,

now pushed outwards, and secured by their clumsy hooks to the broad stone sills, and also by a large nosegay of sweet-scented common flowers that dispensed its sweetness from a wide punchbowl of Old Crown Derby, which would in these days have found ardent admirers.

The weather was fine, the sun was shining, a gentle wind was astir among the trees, passing over the fair-promising fields and the swift bright streams; the sounds of animal life and the song of birds were all about, but not too near, and the picture both inside and out on the Dame's parlour-side was a charming one, of the remote and quiet order. Presently its still-life aspect was dispelled by the entrance of the only person whose presence was familiar to the quaint, formally-disposed rooms. This was Mavis Wynn, who, although she would not have dared to speak of 'the Dame's parlour-side' as her 'own'—indeed, it would have been hardly safe for a dweller in the

Field-flower Farm to apply a proprietorial term to his or her soul—had virtual possession of the despised premises, and prized the privilege highly. Even now, though she came in hastily, and was evidently not going to remain, she glanced around lingeringly, advanced to the window and looked out ; then, having raised the lid of a window-seat, and taken from the convenient recess a work-basket and a roll of linen, she stood for a few moments irresolute. There was an air of fatigue and an expression of care about her, such as, one always thinks, the young ought not to wear, and she sighed, unconsciously, as she passed the back of her hand across and across her forehead.

Despite of the tired, even harassed expression that she now wore, Mavis Wynn would have won something more than mere admiration from those who did not insist on brilliancy of colour as an indispensable constituent of good looks. It was not only that the farmer's daughter looked 'like a lady,' as Mr. Dexter

had remarked, but that she possessed quiet grace and lofty simplicity such as mere ladyhood cannot give, for they are the outward and visible signs of a spiritual condition. It was the expression of her face that was chiefly noted by all who observed Mavis Wynn; the candid, comprehending look in the steady grey eyes, the sweet serenity of the mouth, which was her one truly beautiful feature. That was an era of hideous hair-dressing, but Mavis Wynn wore her abundant chestnut locks as nature set them on her head, drawn back from her broad forehead, and falling behind her ears in soft thick curls. As the light shone upon the hair, waved all over the top of her head with the shell-like curves that no iron can imitate, a touch of colour, which would have been welcome to an artist's eye, was added to the sombre picture presented by the tall slight figure of the girl in her plain mourning dress, and relieved it.

Presently she aroused herself from the pause

of perplexity that had come upon her, and with a last glance around the picturesque old room, at once a harbour of refuge and the home of her dreams, she took her way to the 'Farm-side' of the house. This might have been in another county for all the resemblance that existed between its plentiful and noisy comfort, and the old-world seclusion of 'the Dame's parlour-side,' with its touch of faded stateliness.

The common sitting-room, heavily furnished with horsehair-cushioned chairs, a huge sofa to match, and dark red moreen curtains, but boasting a corner cupboard rich in old china, and adorned with some curious pieces of ancient needlework, in contrast with common Art Union prints in maple frames, was as unpicturesque an apartment as any comfortable farmhouse could show. The sights and sounds of the farm were not shut out from it, and it was on the same level with the big kitchen and substantial offices, one small room intervening.

The latter was a place of motley contents, for it was Farmer Wynn's own, and he prohibited meddling with his papers, accounts, samples, what not, as sternly as the most sensitive and despotic poet, philosopher, playwright, or literary person. With effect too ; for every living creature on the Field-flower Farm was afraid of the master thereof, from that lucky young woman, its nominal mistress, to the beautiful black cat, Isaac. It was a fact of no little significance that the latter sagacious animal would even vacate his favourite seat in the nook by the fireside, where he was perfectly secure from draughts, and retire under the big horsehair sofa, to a roomy footstool provided for such emergencies by his best friend's care, when an oblique glance from his topaz eyes had apprised him that the farmer was ' put out.'

To this common sitting-room, which, for all its heaviness and dulness, had its share of the general aspect of plentiful comfort, Mavis bent her steps. Though it was still early, the hour

was that after-dinner one which usually afforded the female inmates of Field-flower Farm the largest measure of peace and cheerfulness ever meted out to them. The substantial midday meal had been eaten, the table had been cleared, the general tidying previous to the spell of sewing which formed a part of the day's routine had been gone through. The picture presented by the room was not without its homely charm, when Mavis seated herself opposite to her stepmother, and applied herself to stitching a wristband.

'Your father's gone up to the House,' said Mrs. Wynn, breaking a silence during which she had been glancing uneasily at the downcast face and busy hands of her stepdaughter.

'Is he?'

'We shall have a little comfortable time. Give me the other wristband, Mavis: all's right outside, I may sit still for a bit.'

'You look very tired, Sarah; you don't want to sew, I'm sure, and there's no need why

you should. There's no one here to scold you for taking a rest. Sit back in your chair, and shut your eyes for a while.'

'I think I will.'

The girl rose, made her stepmother's position more comfortable by placing a footstool under her feet, and gravely lifted Isaac into her lap. This arrangement conveyed a sense of security, perfectly understood by all three parties to it. Then she resumed her sewing, and the stillness was unbroken in the room, save by the ticking of an old clock, which for antiquity and size might have been Master Humphrey's own, and had told its monotonous tale for more years than any one now living could count.

There was a sort of restraint, but not any lack of affection, between the wife of Farmer Wynn and his daughter. Mavis and her stepmother knew but little of each other, although five years had elapsed since Farmer Wynn brought home to Field-flower Farm the pretty young

woman whose good luck had been the theme of comment, long after the object of not a little envy had ceased to regard herself as a favourite of fortune. Mrs. Wynn had never heard of Sir Peter Teazle, but she knew what it was to be wished joy, after she had become soundly convinced that joy and she had parted company for evermore.

Sarah Price was one of five children, brought up on the scanty earnings of their father, who was in the employ of a Liverpool mercantile firm. Until she set off on her wedding jaunt, she had never been out of Liverpool, except for a Sunday-school holiday in the fields or across the ferry, and to her the comfort, the plenty, the importance of a large farm in Cheshire—her suitor made the most of the advantages to be gained by accepting him—meant promotion indeed. Her father and mother were rejoiced to know that the delicate one of the family, she who had been least able to bear the poor fare and hard work of a

household only to be kept together in decency by the unremitting toil of the women, was to have comforts they could never hope to give her, and that she would be 'quite a lady.' They perceived that Sarah's suitor was what they called 'a bit masterful,' and Mrs. Price stated (to her husband) her belief that he was more than a bit selfish. There was, however, no doubt that he was very much taken with their Sarah ; and these good people, whose life-long tussle with povery had made them regard well-to-do-ness with not unnatural reverence, were to be excused for making the best of a case that had so much tangible good in it.

So Sarah Price married David Wynn, and was taken to Field-flower Farm, there to begin her new life as 'quite a lady.' She knew but little of any kind of life except that which they had all led at home ; she was not an imaginative person, nor had she derived many extraneous ideas from books. There was little taste and less time for reading in the Price household ;

not a gleam of romance ever shone on that homely existence ; but the realities of it were all good, wholesome, respectable, and, in spite of poverty and struggle, happy. The husband and wife, the parents and children, loved and respected each other. The household peace that wealth cannot create, although, unhappily, poverty so often destroys it, was theirs. If Sarah had been going to the other side of the world, the change of place and scene could hardly have been greater to her ; and it was not surprising that the boys and girls whom she was leaving should entertain notions, as pleasing as they were vague, of what Farmer Wynn—who had a grand place of his own, and had given their Sarah a gold watch and a fine silk gown—might possibly do for some or all of them.

CHAPTER V.

THE WYNNS.

FIVE years had elapsed since Sarah Price made the great match, that was talked of to a distance of at least two streets from the dingy dwelling to which her thoughts had often returned with unavailing regret; and it would have been hard to find anywhere a wife who had more soundly repented of her marriage. Timid, narrow-minded, tender-hearted, and weakly, she was not one of those women who can withstand tyranny, and who occasionally succeed in curing tyrants, by convincing them that a change of tactics is their best policy; she was, on the contrary, specially designed and cut out for a victim. David Wynn had never from the first treated her with indulgence; he

had found her timidity exasperating, her ignorance of everything connected with country life troublesome, her feeble health expensive and inconvenient, and he had speedily made her aware that he regarded his marriage as a bad bargain.

Under no circumstances could Mrs. Wynn have been an energetic, capable woman, but her lot was an especially hard one, inasmuch as such qualities as she did possess were entirely wasted, while she was made to suffer every day of her life for the lack of others with which she had not been endowed. Her husband was a coarse, mean, suspicious, cruel tyrant; she had no child, and she would have been a fond and devoted mother—very likely a wise one, also, for the strength that the love of children gives often lies latent in such timid souls. In the house she was totally without consideration. ‘The mistress,’ who knew no more about farming than she knew about Greek, who was afraid of the tamest of cows, and caught a cold that

‘lasted her’ for three months the first time she was taken over the farm, was not likely favourably to impress the people about her. She was set down by common consent as ‘a poor creature’; and as Farmer Wynn made it speedily and particularly plain that he thought very little of her, things went on pretty much as they had done during the years that followed the death of the farmer’s first wife.

At the time of David Wynn’s second marriage but little had been said about his daughter, and that little was not pleasing to Mrs. Price, who possessed good sense and a motherly heart.

‘Sarah don’t need to worry about her,’ was Wynn’s careless answer to a question concerning the girl, then thirteen years old. ‘She lives with her uncle and aunt—Jeffrey their name is—in London. She ain’t coming home; she’ll give Sarah no trouble.’

‘She wouldn’t count it a trouble,’ said the mother, whose ‘heavy handful’ was so cheer-

fully carried ; ‘ she’s always been used to doing for the little ones, and our Sarah knows her duty.’

Once only in the course of four out of the five dreary years since her marriage, had Mrs. Wynn been cheered by the company of her husband’s daughter. She had sometimes presumed to think that she would not have been so complete a failure as a stepmother as in every other capacity she had proved to be, if she had been given the chance of trying what she could make of that relation. She checked her regrets, however, just as she repressed the natural longing for a child of her own, and hushed the natural disappointment when no child came, ‘ to make her feel that she was anything to anybody,’ by the reflection that Mavis was much better away from her father. ‘ It would be as bad for her as it is for me, or worse,’ this poor woman said to herself, when the oppression that weighed upon her life was very hard to bear ; ‘ for she’s young, and has a deal of

spirit, and she might not put up with it as I can.'

David Wynn had given a churlish reception to the tall, thin, large-eyed girl of fifteen, who was sent to Field-flower Farm to recruit her strength after an illness, and the six weeks of her stay had been anything but pleasant to Mavis. She had no love for her father, and to her acute young perceptions, aided by the very different domestic atmosphere of her uncle's house, the wretchedness of her step-mother's existence was plain. The pleasure that Mrs. Wynn derived from the frank affection of the girl was marred by the revelation of a fresh difficulty in her path, and the supply of new aliment to the devouring demon of her husband's temper. Farmer Wynn disliked his wife as much as he despised her; but he did not choose that she should care for anybody, or have anything in her life beyond those things which she held at his absolute will and pleasure. Hitherto, having effectually separ-

ated her from her own family, he had been able to carry these points.

The hopes that her fine match had excited were early extinguished. Mrs. Wynn had no power to invite her parents to her husband's house, even if they had possessed the means of coming to her ; and when she proposed to visit them, Wynn told her if she did so she might stay there, she should not return to him. He would have been incapable of comprehending the courage and self-denial there was in his wife's silent endurance of this act of cruelty, and in her resistance of the temptation to put his brutal threat to the test. As it was, he took her meek submission for a signal victory. She knew better than to quarrel with her bread and butter. She would be long sorry to lose or risk her good home. But what a sneak she was ! He hated a woman with no spirit. Such were the reflections with which Wynn went out to bully his farm-servants and labourers, to the comparatively small extent

of bullying which they would bear from him ; while the wife, in whose case there were no limitations of either law or custom, was weeping her heart out for the poor home she was never more to see, and thinking how gladly her parents would take her back, only that she must not be again a burden upon their poverty. No ; that could never be ; she had to bear this knowledge ; but there was a difference in Mrs. Wynn from that day. She made no farther efforts with herself ; she never again tried to care for her tyrant ; she accepted her insignificance with indifference, indeed with thankfulness. So that she escaped loud-tongued abuse and coarse violence she was content.

Her neighbours were of the opinion that Mrs. Wynn was ‘a poor creature.’ She did not care for company, she did not take any pride in the farm ; though the Field-flower butter was well known for excellence, and Wynn was an authority on sheep. Even a bit of dress was not of such value in her eyes as it ought to have

been. Mayhap she was pious, and that made her low-spirited. Against this ingenious suggestion, however, there was the objection that the Wynns were 'Church'; now piety was, in those parts, supposed to abide in and to be the peculiar property of Dissenters, or, as they were called, 'Chapel' people. Thus she was left a good deal to herself, and as she kept her own counsel with patient reticence that had its origin not in pride but in propriety, Wynn's character stood higher than it deserved. The worst that was said of him was that he was a rough tyke, while there was a good deal of indulgence for a man's not being too fond of his home who had such a mope of a wife in it.

When Mavis Wynn was eighteen, her aunt, with whom she had lived since the death of her mother, died, and she was summoned home by her father. Mrs. Wynn was more than usually ailing, and it was expedient that there should be some one to look after her. Her step-daughter would probably do this as well as

anyone else, and could be made to do it more cheaply. Mrs. Wynn would hardly have known her for the gawky girl whose intelligent observation she had dreaded during the brief period they had passed together. Mavis was older-looking than her years, by reason of the serenity and self-possession that expressed themselves in her features ; in education and refinement she was far beyond any one with whom her father's wife had ever associated. Mrs. Wynn knew nothing positive about Mavis's mother ; she would not have dared to ask her husband a question, and he never talked about his past ; but a rumour had reached her that the farmer's first wife, although she had no money to speak of, had come of ' good ' people, and married beneath her.

Mavis had been only a month at the farm, when she was sent for by Mr. Jeffrey, her aunt's husband, who was dying. David Wynn allowed her, grudgingly enough, to go to London ; but as his brother-in-law, a hard-working professor

of music, and a man of rare taste and cultivation, had some little property to leave—it would not have been prudent to refuse. Mavis was returning from that sorrowful visit when Mr. Dexter saw her, and commented upon the difference between the father and the daughter.

If Mr. Dexter had seen Mavis on her first arrival he would have thought her better-looking. A month is not a long time, even when one is only eighteen, and prone to the hasty decisions, severe judgments, and unhesitating finality of youth; but it did not take a fourth of that period to remove any illusions she might have cherished from the mind of Mavis Wynn, to renew her former dread of her father, and to inspire her with profound compassion for her stepmother. The conditions of Mavis's life had of late been such as to mature her mind and develop her feelings; she had come back to her father's house under the influence of her first serious sorrow, and that influence was a good one. It strengthened the girl for what she had

to bear ; it helped her to discern what she had to do. But the bloom, which her sincere and natural grief had hardly touched, faded under the constraint and misery of a home where a man's overbearing temper and his pleasure in inflicting pain on all who were dependent upon him, rendered wretched every waking hour of the women within its walls.

The home that Mavis looked back to had been very different ; mutual love and helpfulness had reigned in it ; industry and frugality had kept it happy and honourable ; pure minds had sanctified, elevated tastes had refined and beautified it. There was the sharp agony of contrast in the suffering which Mavis endured ; there was the desperate hopelessness that only the young feel. This hateful place was her home now, and here she would have to live always ! Even if she were allowed to return to her uncle, she knew that he was a condemned man, before the blow of his wife's death, that was destined to hasten the execution of the

sentence, fell upon him. The past was all over ; she would probably not be permitted to pursue any of its occupations, to retain any of its associations. Her father intended her to be a servant without wages ; her stepmother had no power to defend her, and no courage to make the attempt.

Mr. Jeffrey left his wife's niece nothing ; his small savings were bequeathed to his only son, who was farming, with a partner, in Canada. Mavis had nothing to show for her journey and travelling expenses, except a box of trumpery keepsakes, mostly old books and rubbish of that kind, and the aggrieved farmer did not spare her on her return, empty-handed, after the funeral.

‘ He will never go on at her as he does at me,’ the poor crushed wife had thought with a faint ray of comfort ; ‘ she’s young, and her spirit isn’t broken, and, after all, she’s his own child. Besides, there’s Mr. and Mrs. Colvin think so much of her, and Wynn don’t want to

lose his character with them ; he lets her sing in the choir, though she ain't paid for it, and he sends me to church regularly with her—and oh, what a comfort and a rest it is ! he will never swear at her and bang her about, surely.'

Once started on this hopeful path of thought, Mrs. Wynn pursued it to the adventurous length of wondering whether her own lot might not possibly be bettered by the presence of Mavis. If there was any one to put any restraint at all upon the ruffianly nature of her tyrant her life might possibly be lightened. For a while it seemed as if Mrs. Wynn's hopes were not unfounded, but the scene that ensued on the return of Mavis after Mr. Jeffrey's death effectually dissipated them. Never before had the unfortunate girl realised to the full the coarse brutality of her father's nature ; never had his wife's dread of him reached a more painful height. An immediate result of the scene of foul-tongued railing was the breaking down of the barrier of silence between the

man's wife and his daughter. When Mrs. Wynn, realising the blessed relief of the farmer's absence, remarked to Mavis that they should have a comfortable time, she knew that all disguise between them was over, that any illusion Mavis might have entertained respecting the life that lay before her was at an end.

‘What will she do? I’m afraid she’ll never learn to bear it. I saw that in her face on Saturday night, when he called her mother’s sister by every filthy name he could lay his tongue to. I couldn’t expect her to bear it for my sake only; I shouldn’t for hers, if I had anywhere to go to, or any way of living.’ So ran the thoughts of Mrs. Wynn, as she covertly observed her stepdaughter’s downcast face and busy fingers, and slowly stroked the glossy black fur of the cat in her lap. She had learned to be so thankful for small mercies that the idleness, the quiet of the tidy room, and the moral certainty that a couple of hours of these good things awaited her, gave her a holi-

day feeling, which even her trouble about Mavis could not dissipate.

‘Sarah,’ said Mavis, suddenly, looking straight at the quiet figure in the horsehair chair, and noting afresh the expression of debility in Mrs. Wynn’s still pretty but commonplace face ; ‘tell me something about yourself. I am here now, you know, for good or for bad—there’s no use in our hiding anything from each other ; you are not so many years older than I, and I don’t think you are able for half so much. I know very little about you ; and I want to find out whether I can help you in any way. We have to bear it together. Is it always so bad as this ?’

‘Almost always,’ answered Mrs. Wynn. Her cheek flushed, her eyes deepened in colour, as she sat upright to make her reply more emphatic. ‘I’ve never known a week’s peace since I left my home to come here, and no one, no woman, that is, ever could know peace where your father is. I can’t help it, though you are

his daughter, and I oughtn't to speak, perhaps——'

'It does not matter ; those rules may be all very well where things are not so bad as they are with us—you and I had better know what we have to face. Tell me ; have you no friends ?'

'I? Not one. My father and mother died of the fever in the same week. I wasn't told they were ill until they were dead, and then I was not allowed to go and look at their dead faces. The girls are doing for themselves : one is married, the other is in a shop in Liverpool ; the boys are gone to America ; I suppose I shall never hear any more about them.'

'Did my father do anything for them ?'

'No, never. And I dare say they think that was my fault, too—they didn't know, bless them ! how could they ? My father and mother knew, though ; I have that comfort ; they knew I did not forsake them, or forget them.'

The habitual timorous quietude of Mrs.

Wynn was broken through ; she was trembling now, as a vision of the past came back to her, and her tears fell. There were answering tears in the girl's eyes.

‘ I fear you have always been very unhappy. Aunt Jeffrey used to say that you must be. I don't know how she knew it, for she never saw my father since I was quite a little child ; but I'm afraid it must have been because my mother was unhappy too. Don't you think this was how she knew ? ’

‘ I suppose it was. But don't you go fretting, dear, about that long ago time. She's over it many a year ; and, if all's true we hear in church, she has what's better worth thinking of to turn her mind to than those old troubles. Besides, it could not have been so bad when he was quite young ; and she was a lady, too, I've heard say.’

‘ Yes, she was a lady,’ said Mavis, feeling, with the sensitiveness of her better education, the simple spontaneous humility of her step-

mother ; ' but I don't think that can have made any difference in him.'

' Perhaps not,' assented Mrs. Wynn, who was not one to stick to her own opinion, ' when he'd got used to having a lady to hector over. All the same, I've seen him meek and mild enough to the gentry hereabout. There's Mr. Colvin, how civil he is to him, and to us before him. Haven't you remarked that, Mavis? '

' Yes, I've remarked that ; but I observed something else too. Mr. Colvin has come here twice, with the intention of asking father why he never goes to church ; and, civil as father has been to him both times, he has gone away without putting the question.'

' Now, how on earth did you know that? He let it out to me, and bragged of keeping the parson in his place ; but you were not in the room.'

' No, and I didn't need to be. There are things that I seem to feel instead of knowing. I suppose it is because I am so terribly afraid of

father myself, that I always know when other people are afraid of him.'

'It is well for you that you are afraid of him,' said Mrs. Wynn, with the earnest conviction of a victim; 'for if you were not, you might try to go against him; you might think it safe, you know, being a grown-up woman as one may say; but it wouldn't be safe, Mavis. You had better by half be as much afraid of him as I am, for you would have no more chance against him than I've had.'

The girl had been stitching away all this time in a mechanical manner, but now she desisted, her work dropped on the table, and the colour faded completely from her face.

'What do you mean? Do you—is it possible—has he ever——?'

'Beaten me, you don't like to say. Indeed he has, many and many a time. I have never told any one; and he has never struck me when there was anybody by. I might have been protected, you know, though people are mostly

for letting a man do what he likes with his own, in these parts. Anyhow, it would have got talked of. But I'm not far off from being as well used to a beating as his dogs and his horses. You know something about that, don't you ?'

'I do indeed,' said Mavis, with a shudder. The knowledge and sight of the habitual cruelty with which animals were treated at Field-flower Farm was the worst part of what she had to bear. She had already found that any interference on her part only made the lot of the helpless creatures harder.

'Then, mind what you do or say. I would not have told you—for my own sake—for no matter what one has gone through or how little one has come to think of oneself, it is never easy to confess to *that*; but I am afraid for *you*. He would think no more of knocking you down, if you crossed him when the devil is in him, than he would think of thrashing Ponto. I would have told you this before you went to

London, and tried to make you see that it's no use, even though you're young and have a spirit, only that things were really better for that month. He was busy with something we know nothing about, and we gained by that; and besides, I was so ill that I could keep out of his way. But it is time to tell you now, and to warn you. You have seen him bad enough, and heard what he can do with his tongue, but do you not ever persuade yourself that's all you have to fear, for if you do, and take heart to set yourself against him, you'll come in for the same as I've come in for, many a time. Don't you put me down for a bad wife, Mavis, because I've told you; there's a deal of that in story books, I know, but I'm no saint, nor yet a martyr. I want you to keep whole bones, and I want to save your father from all the disgrace I can. I have had many a fright since you've been here, but never such a fright as I had on that night when you came home, and he found out that you had been left nothing.

Why he did not strike you in his fury then I do not know.'

'I do, and I will tell you presently. Tell me this first. Why have you stayed with him to be so treated all this time?'

'Because a man's wife must stay with him, child. Try, when your own time comes, to think what that means, for all one's life long. If I had run away to my father and mother, he could have brought me back, to treat me still worse. I never had a shilling of my own since the day I married him; and I'm afraid you'll have to know what a helpless feeling that gives, for I'm sure he'll never let you have one. Meat, and drink, and clothes, he does not grudge us, but he'll make us feel that we have nothing that we don't owe to him.'

Mavis looked as if she were about to speak, but checked herself, and resumed her needle-work.

Mrs. Wynn, whose unusual vehemence and purpose had tired her, said no more for some

time, but turned her ever-weary eyes upon the window from which she could see any one coming up to the house. Presently she looked round, and said to Mavis :

‘ I am not going to work, but you had better put the things by my hand.’ The last shred of disguise was torn away ; the feeble cunning of the slave in dread of the taskmaster was revealed. If Wynn were to come in and catch her with idle hands, she would be sure of the lash—of his tongue. And how that weary woman dreaded it ! Silently Mavis placed working materials by Mrs. Wynn’s side, and stuck a threaded needle in a half-stitched wrist-band. Then she said quietly :

‘ I will tell you why my father did not strike me that night, and why he has never struck you since I came home. It is because he does not want me to leave the house, and he knows I should do it.’

‘ Do it ! why, how could you ? Where could you go to ? ’

‘I don’t know ; but I could leave this place, and I would. If you are right, if he’s afraid of what people would say of him, then there is a way of helping you. It’s my staying here, and putting that much check on him. And, please God, I will do it, Sarah.’

She laid her slender hand upon Mrs. Wynn’s arm for a moment with a half-soothing, half-protecting touch, and then, saying she would make her some tea, left the room. Mrs. Wynn had her tea, but Mavis did not return. She had taken refuge in the Dame’s parlour, and, kneeling upon the cushioned window-seat, was letting the sweet air play upon her troubled face. Shame, aversion, disgust, were strong within her, and her mind was full of youth’s impatient questioning. Was every thing, was every one, bad in this world? How could such out-of-jointness exist as that one human being should be free to make all around him miserable? Mavis put a bad half-hour over her then and there ; one that she never afterwards

forgot. Before she left the Dame's parlour she took a sealed packet out of a drawer in an old cabinet, looked long at it, and restored it carefully to its place.

‘Ah, my dear, dear Aunt Jane,’ so said Mavis in her thoughts, ‘how wise you were, how right you were, how well you knew. And yet, you did not, you could not, foresee the full value of what you did for me.’

‘Your father has come in,’ said Mrs. Wynn, glancing nervously at Mavis when she returned, and busily stitching the wristband; ‘he is in quite a good humour. Whatever his business with the Squire may be, it must be going well. And Mr. Jack has come home.’

CHAPTER VI.

TROT TY VECK.

MAVIS WYNN was, fortunately for herself, an habitually early riser. Had she made any difficulty about the 'routing out' which her father insisted upon, she would have come in for a frank expression of his contempt for her lazy London ways. She escaped this, however, by the readiness with which she rose in time to see the household undress in its simplest expression, and to assist in the tasks which were none too much for the two strapping Welsh girls employed in the farmhouse. Among the many discomforts of her existence, poor feeble Mrs. Wynn regarded enforced early rising with especial distaste. Wynn was apt to come in from his morning inspection of man, beast, and

general 'gear' in a humour for fault-finding, and she was bound to be on the spot.

'It isn't often I get a bit of peace at dinner,' was Mrs. Wynn's mental summary of the situation, 'but it's nothing compared to breakfast. Oh dear, oh dear, what a way of beginning the day, every day of one's life!'

Mavis regarded it as a victory, that she had contrived to procure for her stepmother the immense privilege of breakfasting in bed on a few occasions, by speaking of it to her father as a thing of course, on account of a cold or a headache. As she took especial care that everything should be orderly and comfortable for his own morning meal, there had been nothing worse to encounter than some surly growls at the uselessness of women. On these festivals Mrs. Wynn would be quite cheerful when she came down to her sewing in the big parlour, with a pleasant sense that she was taking the day with the chill off. She had never heard that clever French saying about

‘un mari qui avait des absences délicieuses,’ but the English equivalent of it was her own cherished though unspoken sentiment.

‘You need not get up,’ said Mavis, coming into Mrs. Wynn’s room, on the morning after the conversation just recorded; ‘there’s somebody coming to breakfast with father, and he does not want either of us. So lie still, and I will fetch your tray.’

‘Somebody coming to breakfast! Who can it be? He didn’t say he was expecting any one.’

‘I don’t think he did expect any one, for I was in the passage when this person came to the door, and father seemed surprised. They went into the big parlour, and father came out in a minute, and told me he should not want us at breakfast.’

‘Who can the man be? Have you ever seen him before?’

‘No, he is a stranger, I think. I heard father call him Reckitts.’

‘I don’t know the name.’

Mavis ate her own breakfast in the kitchen, and went about her ordinary occupations. Wynn and the stranger remained in the big parlour until long after the usual breakfast time. At length Mavis heard her father calling to her, and quickly presented herself at the door. The white cloth had been pushed away from one half of the large table in the middle of the room, and a heap of papers and account-books occupied a cleared space; in front of this the visitor was seated. His elbows rested on the table, and he was looking at a pen-and-ink-drawn plan or map, holding it with both hands at a few inches from his near-sighted eyes. Mr. Reckitts was a good-humoured-looking man, under fifty, with pepper-and-salt hair, and a florid complexion. He desisted from his occupation and gave Mavis a nod, but he did not rise.

‘My daughter,’ said Wynn, shortly, and hardly allowed his visitor to say, ‘Glad to see

you, Miss,' before he added: 'Are the windows and doors open on the Dame's parlour-side?'

'Yes, father.'

'Is the place fit to be seen?'

'Yes, father; I have just been dusting the rooms.'

'Then we can go and have a look at them,' said the farmer, addressing the visitor. 'There's some valuable old wood up there.'

These words startled Mavis. She instantly jumped to the conclusion that Mr. Reckitts had come to Field-flower Farm to purchase some of the tapestry or furniture, of whose value she had a much more just idea than her father, for she had seen such things in queer out-of-the-way shops in London, and her uncle Jeffrey had instructed her concerning them. This Mr. Reckitts did not resemble the people she had seen in the old-furniture shops, and who were generally of a greasy and slinking aspect: he was as distinctly bucolic as her

father, though less rough, and more agreeable to look at. Still, she was sure she had hit on the explanation of his visit, and it was disconcerting. She should be sorry if the old things, which aided her to weave the romances in which she found relief from the unlovely realities of her life, were taken away. The immediately pressing consideration was, however, what she should do if her father were to examine the cabinet and find what she had hidden there?

‘ Shall you want me on the Dame’s parlour-side?’ she asked.

‘ No. Will you come?’ said Wynn to Mr. Reckitts. The latter assented and rose.

‘ Wait a bit,’ said the farmer, his habitual suspiciousness coming into play, ‘ while I put these away.’

He began to gather up the papers and account-books on the table, that he might put them under lock and key, and Mavis availed herself of this opportunity to dart away, flit through the intervening passages, gain the

Dame's parlour-side, and secure the hidden packet. On her return she passed her father and the stranger on the stairs, and Wynn addressed her :

‘ Miss Nestle wants to see you. You had better go up to the House this morning.’

‘ I dare say you are right,’ said Mrs. Wynn, when Mavis had told her how she accounted for Mr. Reckitts’ visit, ‘ though I can’t see why he should want to keep us out of the way, if it is only that the man has come about. However, we shall be none the wiser if we were to guess ever so ; and if he sells the things, whether he lets us know anything about it until they have to be packed to go away, will depend on the humour he’s in.’

‘ Oh, dear ! I should be sorry for the Dame’s parlour then ; how forsaken it would look. You would be sorry too. You’re fond of those old things, aren’t you ?’

‘ No, I’m not, Mavis. I should not mind ; I’m not fond of anything’

‘Yes, yes, you are, you’re fond of me,’ said the girl, gaily. ‘Good-bye. I shall have a lovely walk. I wish you were coming.’

As fresh and as fair as the spring morning itself was Mavis Wynn, as she set off on her way to Bassett. The elasticity of her eighteen years was asserting itself; everything around her was bright and beautiful; might there not come some brightness and beauty into her life also? Yesterday the shadows lay long and dark; to-day they were lighter. Nothing was changed in reality, but it was a fine day, she was free to enjoy it, she delighted in a long walk. At the end of this one there was a pleasant visit.

There was quite enough bloom on Mavis’s fair cheek when she passed through the narrow gate in the old wall, took the path through the coppice where the oak trees were just awakening to their tender-green time, and the larches were preparing to ‘hang all their tassels forth,’ and reached the harbour-boathouse by the

water's edge. Here she paused and looked around. Perchance Reuben might be lounging about somewhere, and would push the boat down into the water for her. It was not too much for her own strength to do this; the slope was easy, and she had done it many times before to-day; but Mavis had dressed herself with a good deal of care, and she wanted to avoid possible splashes on her best gown and her black silk scarf. There was, however, no lounging Reuben within view, and she managed to slide the boat into the water without injury to her dress. She crossed the stream, fastened the boat to the post set up for that purpose on the other side, and took the path through the fields.

There was a delicious light wind, it came softly towards her bearing the odours of the spring. The song of birds was in the air; not yet with the piercing fulness of the summer music in it, but strangely gladsome like the young year; the girl's elastic spirits responded

to the influences of the time; the perplexed and weary look her face too often wore passed from it. 'And as she walked, she sang,' like the pilgrims in the one perfect allegory; exercising her sweet powerful voice in the solitude, with such enjoyment of her own music as she had not felt for a long time. Only yesterday she had been in despair; to-day, though nothing had happened, she was as gay as the lark whose carol was no sweeter than her own.

The path that Mavis had taken led through undulating fields, to the high road, which lay for some distance deep down between green banks and hedges—an unusual feature in that part of the country. On the far side were the Bassett plantations of tall slender trees, their stems set about with a multitude of wild flowers. Mavis ceased her singing as she approached the boundary of the fields, whence a few zigzag steps cut in the green bank gave access to the road, and was walking at a swifter pace towards the lodge gates of Bassett, when

her quick ear caught a sharp yelping cry and the patter of feet between the hedge and the plantation. Mavis ran lightly up the face of the bank, and saw a small grey terrier with a wiry coat, a meagre tail, and a distressful expression of countenance, limping along on three legs, with the fourth held up, as if hurt. The intelligent little dog, meeting the enquiring gaze of Mavis, stood still on his three legs, but yelped anew. She sought for a conveniently wide space in the hedge, knelt down and called him to her; he came, and immediately recognised a friend. Mavis examined the wounded paw, and found a long sharp thorn embedded in it. She seated herself on the green bank, took off her gloves, laid the little terrier in her lap, and talked to him in the reasonable way that always does with a nice dog.

‘I can take it out, if you’ll let me, and be good,’ she said, handling the poor paw tenderly; ‘you don’t look as if you would bite me, even if I did hurt you a little. It will be all right

in a minute.' She had been feeling with her fine finger-tips for the head of the thorn, and she now suddenly and skilfully pulled it out. The terrier justified her good opinion of him ; he uttered a little whine, but he did not snap at her hand, and presently when she put him down, and rose to her feet, the patient fell to licking the wound with great satisfaction.

Mavis shook out her dress, thinking, with a smile, that the little dog was as bad as the boat, and trying to remember, as she patted the terrier's rough head in adieu, what was the hard name of somebody, in a classical story, who extracted a thorn from a lion's paw. She had just moved onward, when she again heard steps on the other side of the hedge. This time it was not a four-footed tread, and it was accompanied by a lively whistling. Mavis walked on. But the little terrier had also caught the sounds, and recognised them ; he scampered before her for some distance and ran up with the liveliest demonstrations of

delight to a young man who now appeared at the top of the bank.

‘Ha! Trotty, old boy, where have you been?’ said the master of the terrier, and the next moment he saw the lady passing along the path, close under the point at which he stood. He raised his hat, Mavis bent her head slightly, and they went on their several ways. For a moment it seemed as though the wiry terrier owned a divided allegiance; he cocked his ears interrogatively, turned a wistful gaze upon his master, ran back a few steps, and looked after the lady who had befriended him. But the master whistled, and the little dog followed him, puzzled, no doubt, at the unaccountable stupidity of human beings. Here were two persons calculated to enjoy each other’s society—they were both kind to him; could there be a closer bond?—and yet he was unable to introduce them, owing to that vexatious necessity for speech, so absurdly imposed upon mankind.

Miss Nestle's rooms were situated in a cheerful part of the old house, and occupied a position of vantage. They commanded the offices, and yet they were socially central. Miss Nestle had a comfortable conviction that 'much could not go on' without her knowledge, so long as the household might be descended upon suddenly and noiselessly from her own room. This conviction was a great help and stay to Miss Nestle, for she was of an anxious temperament, and entertained the firmest conviction that 'much' was always 'going on,' wherever her eye, or the almost equally efficacious dread of it, was not. They were ideal rooms for their purpose, for they were absolutely comfortable to the occupant, and they formed a kind of household museum. Lined with cupboards guiltless of a speck of mildew, or a grain of dust; fitted with drawers and closets on any item of whose miscellaneous contents Miss Nestle could have laid an unerring hand in the dark; spacious, light, and

airy, Miss Nestle's rooms were the admiration of her friends, and a source of much heart-burning to the handmaids under her firm and uncompromising rule. Young housemaids on their promotion, ardently desirous of a character from 'the county,' had been known to relinquish their project of serving on the Bassett establishment, upon merely contemplating the superhuman cleanliness of Miss Nestle's rooms; the crispness of the chintz curtains, the polish of the mahogany furniture, and the brilliant burnishing of the brass grates, fenders, and fire-irons.

Audience of the housekeeper was a much more serious ordeal than audience of the Squire, when any error had to be acknowledged, or shortcoming explained away; not that Miss Nestle was a merciless person, but that she had a genuine incapacity for understanding how anybody should fail to do his or her duty, and yet regard himself or herself as fit to live. Her point of view was unchang-

ing, her decisions were prompt. It did not matter, according to Miss Nestle, whether you left 'your corners' unswept, or whether you robbed a bank; 'you were, in proportion to your opportunities, equally unfaithful to your employer in either case. In the one, you were entrusted with a sweeping-brush, in the other with the key of the safe; in either you did your worst; the difference was merely conventional. If her mind could have been got at, it probably would have been found that Miss Nestle carried her consistency to the point of thinking that if a similar punishment could be awarded to both offences it would be well.

Miss Nestle was a little woman, with a face which would have been sharp if it had not been round—that is to say, its shape contradicted its features. Her keen eyes, interrogative nose, and firm mouth displayed themselves in a smooth and placid disc of chin, cheek, and forehead, all of juvenile colouring, and her abundant light hair, brushed until it shone

like glass, was put plainly away under a cap which many a woman ten years Miss Nestle's senior would have considered herself too young to wear. That cap was a solemn institution; only one living individual had ever ventured to treat it with levity, and the good humour with which Miss Nestle took his impertinence gave the measure of his importance with her. The irreverent scoffer was Jack Bassett, who told her he was sure she wore that awful thing to awe the maids and scare away the men.

Miss Nestle, her rooms, and the celebrated cap, were all at their spick-and-span-est when Mavis arrived to visit the Squire's housekeeper, who was regarded with great respect by the neighbours, and who remembered Farmer Wynn's first wife well. In the cupboard-lined sitting-room a bright fire was burning, as only Miss Nestle's fires burned, making no 'ash' and observing the nice distinction between crackle and sputter. In her chintz-covered

chair sat Miss Nestle, with her invariable key-basket upon the crimson-covered table at her side, together with her workbox, a solid structure of rosewood, with her initials on a little mother-of-pearl tablet like a whist-counter inserted in the lid.

She received Mavis kindly, but ran a quick eye over her attire, to ascertain whether it had any 'fallalishness' about it. Fallalishness was in Miss Nestle's vocabulary a generic term for the evil results of London bringing-up. She had never visited the great city, but she entertained as bad an opinion of it as the most intimate knowledge could have justified. Re-assured by the unpretending neatness of her visitor's dress, Miss Nestle plunged cosily into a conversation which consisted chiefly of questions on her part and answers on that of Mavis, concerning the details of her uncle Jeffrey's illness and death, and the process of her own 'settling down' at Field-flower Farm.

'You'll find a deal to do, my dear, for I'm

told Mrs. Wynn is but a poor creature in health, so you will have to be active and look after things. It can't be all reading and writing with you now ; no, nor all playing the piano either, as your father says it has been. You'll be settling down, you know.'

While Miss Nestle spoke thus, in the distinct staccato tone used by certain persons in speaking to small children, she cast an upward glance at the presses which lined the opposite wall, as though she foresaw a long career of potting and preserving for Mavis, now happily rescued from frivolous pursuits.

'I shall have to help, of course,' said Mavis, with a little hesitation, on which Miss Nestle instantly pounced.

'You are not going to give way to fallalishness, I hope. That would never do. Depend upon it, my dear, there's nothing like knowing one's place, and keeping oneself in it. What I always say, and what I always will say, is :

Keep yourself in your place, and then you can respect yourself, and other people can respect you.' This sententious sentiment was so well known to Miss Nestle's intimates, that a saucy still-room maid, being at the time 'under notice,' had once observed it was a wonder Belshazzar the parrot, who lived in Miss Nestle's parlour, had not learned the saying by rote long ago.

'And I'm sorry to say there's a great deal of the other kind of thing going on. Young people that are above their station are safe to get into trouble, for they're just fit for no place at all.'

'I did not mean that—I am not so foolish,' said Mavis; 'I only meant that I have not been used to a farm, and my uncle and aunt thought I should be a good teacher of music, after a time. I must not give up my music, must I?'

'No, I suppose not,' admitted Miss Nestle, grudgingly; 'but I hope you'll never want to teach music, or anything else, my dear. What

I like is to see girls useful and happy in their parents' homes, until such time as they have homes of their own provided for them by husbands of their own station and way of life. When things are like this, girls can keep themselves in their place, and then they can respect themselves, and other people can respect them.'

'Nesty! Have you got any Friar's Balsam in the Museum?'

The voice came from the door, and Miss Nestle turned her head sharply in that direction. A good-looking young man, with merry blue eyes, a sunburnt complexion, and a very pleasant smile, had entered the room unheard by her, and was standing near the door, holding his soft felt hat (known in those days as a wideawake) in his left hand, and a wiry grey terrier under his right arm.

'Goodness! Mr. Jack, is it you?' exclaimed Miss Nestle, 'and wanting Friar's Balsam! Of course I've got it. It is in the Store-Medicine division of the second press, on the

third shelf from the top ; but I shall have to fetch the steps to get it.'

'I'll fetch the steps, Nesty,' said the intruder, coming forward and bowing to Mavis, who acknowledged his salutation with a very becoming blush ; 'I beg your pardon for intruding in this way.'

'Not at all, Mr. Jack,' said Miss Nestle ; 'it's only Farmer Wynn's daughter come to see me. What's wrong, that Friar's Balsam's wanted?'

Mr. Jack, having adroitly treated Miss Nestle's rejoinder as an introduction of himself to Mavis, addressed her :—

'My dog has hurt his paw, Miss Wynn, I don't know how ; he went lame suddenly, and he has a bad scratch ;'—here Mr. Jack set the terrier down, and that sagacious creature gave Mavis a sniff and a pleasant bark of friendly recognition—'so I came to the Museum for Miss Nestle's cure-all.'

'Oh, then, it's for Trotty Veck you want it,

Mr. Jack. I was afraid you had been up to some mischief of your own. Here, Trotty, Trotty Veck, let me see what has happened to you. Bless the dog, he won't come near me! Any one would think he knew you, Mavis.'

'Mavis!' said Mr. Jack to himself, 'what a pretty name!'

'I believe he does know me,' said Mavis, as she stooped over the dog, and smoothed his hard little skull, while he winked his gratification. 'We have met already. I can tell you how he was hurt. It was a thorn, and it ran very deep into his foot. I was passing the hedge at the time. I saw him limping and in great pain, so I took the thorn out, and he remembers me.'

Mavis did not get through this explanation without some embarrassment, for the merry eyes of Trotty Veck's master were fixed upon her, and though she was looking down she was conscious of that fact; nor did her embarrassment escape the notice of Miss Nestle. This

was as it should be ; the farmer's daughter was becomingly gratified by the notice of the Squire's son.

‘ I'm sure we are both—myself and Trotty Veck, I mean—very much obliged to you, Miss Wynn,’ said Mr. Jack ; ‘ it was very kind and very clever of you to come to his aid like that. How do you like his name ? ’ he continued, immediately assuming their community of interest in the terrier, after the fashion of all true lovers of animals.

‘ I don't know,’ said Mavis, raising her head and meeting his eyes for the first time ; ‘ it is an odd name ; not like a dog's. Why did you call him Trotty Veck ? ’

‘ Don't you know “ The Chimes,” Miss Wynn ? Aren't you up in your Dickens ? Don't you remember the patient little ticket-porter with the good daughter, waiting for a job in the angle of the wall, with all the spirits floating out of the bells ? You do ? Ah, I thought so. Well, I called him Trotty Veck,

because he is so like the ticket-porter in the face, and has just the same springy, on-the-go sort of look—you see it, don't you ?'

'He isn't very springy just at this moment, is he?' said Mavis, with a smile which Mr. Jack mentally noted as 'heavenly;' 'but I know exactly what you mean. He is a dear dog, and of course you are very fond of him.'

Mr. Jack felt an unaccountable desire to say that he should be much more fond of Trotty Veck from that day forward; but mingled bashfulness and discretion restrained him.

While this dialogue was in progress, the practical-minded Miss Nestle slipped out of the room, reappeared with a light mahogany step-ladder, and mounted to the investigation of the third shelf in the Store-Medicine division of the second cupboard, and the research of Friar's Balsam. At this moment, Mr. Jack pretended to become aware for the first time of what she was doing, and vigorously assisted her. Trotty's foot was dabbed with the panacea, and

then there did not seem to be any valid reason why Mr. Jack should not go on his way, especially as Miss Nestle persisted in standing by the side of the table, in an attitude of respectful waiting which he could not pretend to misunderstand. He could not go on talking any longer about the dog, and the fortunate thing it was that Miss Wynn had seen Trotty (neither he nor Mavis hinted at their having observed each other on that interesting occasion), and he could not think of anything else to talk about. Miss Nestle came to his aid, without intention, by saying :

‘ I was going to take Mavis Wynn to see the rooms, Mr. Jack. She’s got to be at home by dinner-time.’

‘ Then I’ll come round with you and Miss Wynn—if she will allow me. It’s ever so long since I’ve been in the old rooms. There is not much to see; you must not expect curiosities.’

‘ You’re used to fine places; other folks are not, Mr. Jack,’ remarked Miss Nestle, severely.

Her susceptibilities were slightly ruffled. Mr. Jack was just a little too polite to Mavis. To talk about Miss Wynn allowing him to accompany her, and to suggest that she could fail to be impressed with the grandeur of the house, was a departure from the golden rule of keeping himself in his place. As the trio quitted the room, leaving Trotty Veck, invested with the privileges of an invalid, to enjoy the fire and Miss Nestle's large and comfortable footstool, there was discontent in the shake of the celebrated cap.

Mavis was taken to see all the glories of the ancient house, and her companions expatiated on them, each in a characteristic way. The books, and the family portraits, pleased Mavis most. To live among those pictures, and to be able to read all those books, would be an enviable lot, Mavis thought, and then she wondered whether there was a portrait of Mr. Jack's mother anywhere, but reproved herself immediately. That would be, of course, in one

of Squire Bassett's own rooms, not to be seen by every comer.

In the great drawing-room stood a handsome grand pianoforte. The sight of this object was to Mavis what the sight of wine would be to a toper who had not seen a bottle, or the sight of a box of cigars to a smoker who had not smelt tobacco, for a purgatorial age; she longed inexpressibly to run her fingers over the keys. Miss Nestle demanded her attention for the heraldic carvings of the mantelpiece, but her eyes turned so reluctantly from the piano that her guide could not but notice her preoccupation.

‘It is a beautiful bit of rosewood,’ said Miss Nestle, complacently. ‘I have heard say they don’t make them like that nowadays,—and a splendid polish. I have kept it bright; I don’t hold with covers.’

‘The piano has a fine tone, no doubt.’

‘Do try it, Miss Wynn. You play, I know you do, I can see you do,’ cried Mr. Jack,

impetuously endeavouring to open the instrument.

‘Oh no, no, pray don’t,’ said Mavis, shrinking back in great confusion.

‘Mr. Jack, what are you thinking of?’ remonstrated Miss Nestle. ‘Of course the grand piano is always kept locked, except when there’s company.’

‘Is it, Nesty?’ said Mr. Jack, coaxingly; ‘then you’ve got the key, and you’ll let Miss Wynn try the piano.’

But Mavis did not give Miss Nestle time to answer him. She said she must go, that she ought to be at home now, and must hurry away. She would look at the tapestry another day, if Miss Nestle would allow her.

‘If she was what’s called a lady—for a real lady she certainly is,’ said Jack Bassett to himself, ‘and she had come here alone, I should have offered to walk home with her as a matter of course; but because she’s Farmer Wynn’s daughter, I mustn’t. It would not be the thing to do. And that’s manners!’ . . .

‘I saw young Mr. Bassett,’ Mavis said to Mrs. Wynn; ‘he came to the housekeeper’s room for something he wanted.’

‘Well, and what do you think of him?’

‘Of his looks, do you mean? He is very pleasant and happy-looking.’

‘Yes; he’s all that. I suppose he’ll be going off to his regiment soon—and a handsome officer he’ll make. No wonder the Squire’s so proud of him. Miss Nestle says he’s to marry some great lady, but I don’t remember her name, when he’s old enough.’

‘Oh, indeed,’ said Mavis. She added, after a minute: ‘Young Mr. Bassett has a dear little dog, with a queer name—Trotty Veck.’

‘He always was such a one for dogs. But, Mavis, do you know Mr. Reckitts is only just gone, and your father has taken him in the car to the station. I never saw him at all; I had orders to stay upstairs. There’s something more up than selling the old oak, depend upon it.’

CHAPTER VII.

JACK.

JACK BASSETT had been two days at home, but he was still ignorant of the change that had passed upon the Squire's fortunes. There was so much similarity between the state of mind of both father and son that each felt reluctant to enter upon the matter foremost in his thoughts. The letter of reproof and remonstrance that the Squire had been planning and putting off when Mr. Dexter brought the bad news to Bassett, had never got itself written. What the Squire really did write to his son was : ' Come home at once, and let us talk things over.' Jack Bassett came home, and was received by his father without the smallest symptom of a disposition to blame or call him

to account for anything. How was he to break in upon this blissful state of things with a penitent narrative of his foolish expenditure, and the manner in which he had been 'let in' by a couple of fellows who were in 'holes,' out of which their respective 'governors' would not help them, as Jack knew his 'governor' would have helped him had he been so green as either of them. The truth was that Jack Bassett had been considerably the greenest of the three, and now he knew it; but this correction of his impressions rendered it more difficult for him to speak to his father. All the way down in the train he had been wondering what he should say, and he had hoped the Squire would begin that talking-over of things which Jack dreaded and disliked as much as most young people, likewise the middle-aged and old, dread and dislike the facing of a difficulty.

Jack knew it was not the money the Squire would mind so much; it was his having

made a fool of himself in more than one way. And yet his second day at home was wearing on to evening, and not a word had been said by his father about those peccadilloes which Jack was conscious he had considerably extenuated in his written communications.

The Squire was looking worn and grave—Jack had sufficient grace to feel an accusing twinge as he noted the deepened lines in his father's face and the absent expression of his eyes—the bad quarter of an hour was going to be a really bad, though plainly not an angry one. Anger on his father's part was completely out of his experience; the Squire had always been gentle to a fault with the boy; 'father and mother both,' people said, when Jack was a child. The bad quarter of an hour seemed to be hanging off, however; and Jack, to whom it never occurred that his father had any trouble of his own on which he, too, was reluctant to enter, allowed his high spirits to have their way, and presented a remark-

ably cheerful aspect to everybody about the place.

‘My besetting sin, procrastination,’ the Squire had said to Mr. Dexter ; and if that was not the gravest, it certainly was an important defect in his character. In the present instance, most people would have been disposed to regard it leniently, for the Squire had a hard thing to do. The sight of his son was like summer sunshine to his eyes : he allowed them to enjoy it for a little while. The disappointment, anxiety, and apprehension that he had been full of when he pondered over and put off his letter to Jack were now reduced to trifling proportions ; the greater trouble had swallowed up the less ; nothing of what Jack was thinking about was in his father’s mind.

A third day might have elapsed without recording Jack Bassett’s bad quarter of an hour among its incidents, but for certain occurrences which combined to oblige the Squire to

take his courage in his two hands. On the third morning the post brought a letter for Mr. Bassett from Mr. Dexter, and one for Jack from Sir Henry Trescoe, a neighbour and friend. The Squire put Mr. Dexter's letter in his pocket and said nothing about it, but Jack with great satisfaction imparted to him the contents of Sir Henry's missive.

'There's a lot of people staying at Trescoe, and Sir Henry invites me for three days. He says he knows of old it's no good asking you. How jolly it was there at Christmas!'

'Is it for this week or next?'

'For Thursday,' said Jack, pushing the note across the breakfast-table towards his father, who looked at it absently and laid it down, while Jack indulged in reminiscences of his last visit to Trescoe Park, chiefly referring to horses and dogs.

'You wish to go there, then?' said the Squire, abruptly, when Jack came to a pause.

'Yes; that is, if you don't mind,' added

Jack, slightly confused, for it occurred to him that his father might think it rather soon for him to leave home. Consideration of the Squire's feelings was one of Jack's good points.

‘I don't mind at all, my dear boy.’

The Squire left the table, and stood on the hearthrug in silence. Jack felt very uncomfortable ; the bad quarter of an hour was casting its shadow before it. His spirits vanished, and he left off eating toast and marmalade.

‘I have letters to write,’ said the Squire, at length, ‘but I want you by-and-by. What were you thinking of doing this morning?’

‘There's that pointer pup at Fieldflower Farm that Wynn was talking of,’ said Jack, with an unaccustomed sensation of warmth about his ears ; ‘I was thinking of having a look at it. But, of course, there's plenty of time for that in the afternoon.’

‘Come to the bookroom in an hour,’ said the Squire, and then he went away hastily, regardless of his newspapers. Poor Jack sat staring

disconsolately at the coffee-pot, until an admonitory paw placed on his knee reminded him that Trotty Veck liked a lump of sugar o' mornings.

'It's very bad for you, I believe,' said Jack, severely, as he carefully selected the proper-sized lump, which was bolted by Trotty with a grateful snap, 'but you may as well have it. Come along.'

* * * * *

'It is as well there has been something to make me do it to-day,' said the Squire to himself, as he prepared to write to Mr. Dexter, 'or I do believe I should still have put it off. But this makes it so plain that the change must be thorough, I can't let my boy go on talking of what is never to be.'

Squire Bassett's letter was a long one, and not easy to write. There had been no urgent occasion in the Squire's affairs for that kind of minute method which is to some men a distinct and palpable pleasure, while to others it is a simple impossibility, and now that he had to look

at everything all round, he could not make his resources come up to the general estimate of them at which he and Mr. Dexter had arrived. The purport of his letter was to point out to his adviser that the change in his position must be even more radical than they had contemplated. At that point the Squire paused, and held his pen suspended over the nearly filled sheet. He wrote a small neat hand, of a kind which generally goes with much reading, annotating, and extract-making, and his epistolary method was of the polished and careful kind that has not been so completely discarded by the men as by the women of the present generation. The long pauses, and the effort that it cost him to add the concluding paragraph, were out of proportion to the seeming simplicity of the matter of it, for it contained merely these words:—

‘ The details of your interview with Monsieur Reveillon are curious ; the result is, I should think, much more important than was anticipated. Believe me, I thoroughly appreciate

your motives, and I quite understand your views, but I must ask you to say no more. I do not wish to be informed of anything beyond the facts which you have now told me.'

The Squire, having written his letter, rose and walked to and fro, thinking, until he heard steps on the terrace, and presently saw Jack, with Trotty Veck at his heels, at the French window. He admitted the young fellow, who glanced at him rather shyly as he said, 'Here I am, sir, up to time, I hope,' and his heart was sore for the beloved son who had all his troubles before him.

* * * * *

'Almost the worst of it is that what I have to tell you about myself—for you don't know it all yet—will make this harder for you. I've been a fool, father, and more than a fool.'

The young fellow's tone was full of remorse, and tears stood in his eyes. 'The best of it,' replied his father, 'is that you feel thus. The worst of it to me, much the worst, is the change

to you. We will not talk or think of any follies or mistakes on your part now ; they are swept away by a more serious calamity, and I am sure nothing of the sort would have occurred again.'

'I hope not, father,' said Jack, much moved by the Squire's ready forgiveness and unshaken trust ; 'but I've had a lesson in not thinking too well of myself, and so I won't say I'm quite sure.'

'That is right. You do well to distrust yourself, and I do well to trust you. As things are, we may both take it as certain that you will never incur debts which neither you nor I can hope to pay ; and, that being so, let me have a memorandum of everything you owe. *Everything*, mind, Jack ; 'don't make the mistake of keeping anything back—it will only be a skeleton in a closet if you do—and you shall have the money at once. The lecture I meant to administer to you in writing shall be taken as read, and you and I will look the future in the face together.'

Jack Bassett was not given to introspection, or afflicted with self-consciousness; but, if he had thought about it, he might have dated his ceasing to be a boy and becoming a man from that particular hour.

He was conscious that there was an immense gulf set between yesterday and to-day, and that he had as completely done with his old self in certain respects as he had done with the short jacket and peaked cap which distinguished the garb of boyhood in his time. The facts were bewildering, even with his father's full and free explanation; but Jack had never heard much about the big lawsuit. It had been a dim but not a terrible image to him, something which he did not distinguish from mortgages, charges, and so forth; things impartially set down by him as nuisances, inseparable, he supposed, from the possession of landed property, and exclusively within the province of Mr. Dexter. He had never been troubled with a prevision that the suit might

interfere with him personally, to blight his hopes and obstruct his purposes. The revelation took him entirely by surprise. No latent suspicion or apprehension leaped up into light, to aid the Squire in his task, and that task was as hard as he expected to find it.

There was, however, solace in the good and noble trait that showed itself in Jack's first spontaneous utterance, and the Squire's burden was sensibly lightened by this. The very change that fell upon his son's face, as the conversation proceeded, was pleasing to the Squire to see; for it was the impress of strength and composure set upon the countenance of one who had hitherto had no call for either.

The talk that was begun in the book-room was continued upon the terrace; the two walked up and down there in the spring sunshine, the father leaning closely on the arm of the son, and feeling, in the very depth and intensity of his concern and commiseration for

him, a closer companionship than had ever before existed between them.

Jack was not even like what the Squire must have been in his youth ; the lines of his face were different, and the thoughtful inward look of the father was not to be found in the eyes of the son. The one had the expression of a man of books ; the other that of a man who was ready for a life of action when the chance should come to him. There was courage as well as lightheartedness in Jack's merry blue eyes, and determination in the lines of his well-cut, not too delicate, mouth and chin. A bright, sociable, honourable young fellow, who might, perhaps, have no extraordinary brains, but would belie his looks if he ever failed to produce at need sufficient intelligence to get him creditably through life ; this is just what Jack Bassett looked like and what he was. Not an heroic figure, but a simple and a manly one ; the sort of person of whom gentle, kindly-natured women were apt to say,

‘How fond of him his mother would have been!’

This record of some incidents in Jack Bassett’s career has to do, not with the details, but with the result of that conference. It was entirely confirmatory of the Squire’s view of his son’s character; the tenacity, which he had been inclined to rate more highly than Mr. Dexter regarded it, came out very strongly. Jack had never thought of himself in the future as anything but a soldier, and he was not going to be moved by what had happened to think of himself as anything but a soldier now. A soldier he would be, and if the dazzling portion of his vision, the career of the ‘light dragoon,’ with its dash, its extravagance, its pleasure, its prestige, and the tinge of romance that still hung about it, and was so soon to be deepened in its tints by war, glory, and poetry, had to be relinquished—Jack comprehended at once that it must be—there would be left the plain and solid portion. It was

not difficult to get a commission in a line regiment; if his father could not allow him anything, why then he could, and would, live on his pay. He knew what that would mean—the next thing to the impossible, but only the next; while it was not the absolutely impossible he could do it. But rather than not be a soldier, rather than be anything else, Jack Bassett would serve in the ranks. Did his father know the splendid chances that were coming, and how impossible it would be for Jack to turn his mind to any civil pursuit? The Squire, although he had never been troubled with a military aspiration of his own, entered with sympathy into the feelings that he had foreseen.

If it lay within his power to get for Jack his own way, the boy should have it. A thwarted desire should not be added to fallen fortunes. There was something in Jack's resolution that rang true; at all events, it had not been the mere external glitter of a military

life that had attracted his son. This pleased the Squire, although, so far as the desired object was concerned, no hen could less have shared the propensity of her duckling-chick to take the water.

Perhaps this very strangeness also pleased him. Like most studious and scholarly men, Squire Bassett was a great novel-reader. The romance of military life as Maxwell depicted it, its pomp and dash as Lever drew them, had given him pleasure of an intense kind, but pleasure as abstract and as uninfected as that with which he read the 'Arabian Nights,' or narratives of Arctic exploration. From the first, he had acquiesced in the boy's choice of a profession; but now he seemed to see that it was something more, that it was a vocation, and with that perception came a resolution that this thing should be.

The machinery that in the good old times before Abolition of Purchase converted a youth who could pull through at Sandhurst into a

young gentleman bearing her Majesty's commission, was very different from that which now accomplishes a like result. It implied not only the expenditure of more money, but the employment of interest ; and both had been provided for in Jack's case, on the supposition that he was going to be a light dragoon of the approved type, with a liberal allowance, and the prospective inheritance of the Bassett estate to lend ease and distinction to that career. But the money had now to be withdrawn, and the interest to be turned into another channel, and the talk between the Squire and his son did not come to an end until the proceedings to be taken in this new conjuncture of affairs had been arranged.

It was surprising, but true, that at the close of this momentous interview Jack was in much better spirits than he had been at its beginning. He knew the worst ; and was it so bad after all ? Yes, it was very bad ; not all Jack's youth and spirits could obscure his common

sense ; but it might have been so much worse ! There might have been nothing at all saved out of the wreck of their fortunes, and then what should he have come to ? A clerk's desk, perhaps ; but no, that could never have been while the Queen's shilling was within reach. However, he had to be grateful that the worst was only what it was. As Jack obeyed his father's suggestion that he should try to 'walk it off,' while the Squire himself was adding a postscript to his letter to Mr. Dexter, to tell him how uncommonly well the boy had behaved, he felt that strange elation which sometimes comes to strong natures when a great demand is made upon them, however painful it may be.

It would, however, have been pitiful to a keen observer to notice the quickened interest with which Jack Bassett looked around him, as he took his way past the stables and the back of the gardens, down by the old fishpond, and struck into the roadside plantation out of which Trotty Veck had run the day before.

There was in his look something like the quickened curiosity of a stranger. This was his home ; all these places and objects were familiar to him ; why did he look at them to-day as though they were full of novelty ? Because, for the first time in his life, he looked at them with the fear of losing them at his heart. The Squire had said that the horses must go, and the land must be let ' up to the windows.' But this would surely not be necessary, if only he, Jack, should be able to do with very little ? Still, he had listened to the horses, rustling and stamping in their comfortable stalls, as he passed the stables, and his glance had rested lingeringly on the smooth lawn and the fine trees, with their pleasure-ground aspect.

One of the effects of a sudden change was making itself evident to Jack ; it felt like a long time since yesterday, since this morning ; it seemed as if, all things being so different, he could not possibly be the same. Not that he

was thinking it out methodically ; there was no such systematic wisdom and cold-bloodedness about him ; his mind was, so to speak, in a great whirl, and amid his confused feelings only two were clear and persistent. He hoped Mr. Dexter would not declare the Line also to be out of the question, and he wondered what all the fellows would say.

It was early in the year for Mrs. Wynn to carry her needlework out of doors, but the fineness of the day and the weariness of her spirits had tempted her into the arbour boat-house, during the absence of Mavis, who had gone to see the curate in charge about the church music for the next Sunday. The parsonage was in the neighbourhood of Squire Bassett's house, and Mavis on this occasion also availed herself of the short cut effected by crossing the river. Thus, when Jack, in the course of his walk, came to the fields facing (with the river between) the ancient side of Fieldflower Farm, he found the boat fastened

to its post, and, looking across, saw Mrs. Wynn sitting in the arbour. Although he had not forgotten his purpose of visiting the farm, or that subtle pretext of the pointer pup, he had not taken the path over the bridge by which he would have reached the front gate; he had not been thinking of where he was going, and the sight of the boat was a suggestion on which he acted promptly. Making a speaking-trumpet of his hands, Jack shouted to the occupant of the arbour :

‘ How do you do, Mrs. Wynn ? I am coming across.’

Mrs. Wynn rose hurriedly, dropping her needlework, and received ‘ Mr. Jack,’ as he stepped out of the boat, with her usual half-frightened respect. Wynn was not in the way, she said; he had gone to Chester, and she hoped she saw Mr. Jack well.

She saw Mr. Jack very well indeed, and very glad to be at Bassett again and to see all his friends. What fine weather they were having,

and how jolly the old place was looking ! Mr. Jack was a little disjointed in his talk, and rather fidgety in his manner, looking about him a good deal, sitting down and getting up again, and not attending much to Mrs. Wynn's civilities. She was disturbed by Wynn's absence, when Mr. Jack was so kind as to come to the farm, and he such a little time at home too !

‘Never mind about that, Mrs. Wynn,’ said Jack, in that cheery tone which the poor woman declared to Mavis did her as much good as the hymns on Sunday ; ‘I’ve lots of time on my hands. I can come to see Wynn and the pup any day.’

‘It’s a beauty, Mr. Jack.’

‘I’m sure of that. But how came the boat on the other side ? Wynn wouldn’t use it ; he’s gone the other way.’

‘Oh no, Mr. Jack,’ answered Mrs. Wynn ; ‘it was Mavis—that’s Wynn’s daughter, you know. She’s come home to live with us now since her Aunt and Uncle Jeffrey’s death.

She's gone down to the parsonage, and she took the boat across.'

'I must return as I came then, and leave it back for Miss Wynn. I had the pleasure of meeting her yesterday ; she was very good to my dog, Trotty Veck. I should have brought Trotty to see you, Mrs. Wynn, for you really do know a good dog when you see one, only that he is still a little lame. Did you say Miss Wynn had been gone some time?'

'Since just after dinner. I could let you see the pup now, if you liked, Mr. Jack.'

'No, no, thank you, I think I will not mind it to-day. It would be better to wait for Wynn, perhaps. You must be glad to have Miss Wynn with you ; it has been rather lonely for you, and Miss Nestle says you haven't been very well since Christmas, when I was at home last.'

Now this was just what Mrs. Wynn liked in Mr. Jack ; for a young gentleman like him he was so knowledgeable and kind in his ways.

Why, even when he was quite a boy, he would speak nice and quiet, and keep from knocking things about, on account of her poor head; a plea which had no chance whatever with her ordinary surroundings. Praise of this simple kind lavished upon the object of their common admiration, constituted Mrs. Wynn's chief contributions to the conversation when she and Miss Nestle, of whom the farmer's wife was rather afraid, met. This was well, for it mollified the contempt with which Miss Nestle was disposed to regard Mrs. Wynn, on account of her feeble notions of housekeeping, and lack of enthusiasm for that fine and precious art.

‘It is very friendly of Miss Nestle to think about my health, I'm sure, Mr. Jack, and it is but poorly at the best of times, as she knows. But Mavis is a good companion to me, and if it was not for herself I should be very glad of her coming home.’

‘But why “for herself”?’ asked Jack, with frank curiosity, taking a seat on the

bench by Mrs. Wynn's side ; ' isn't it all right for her too ? '

' Well, no, Mr. Jack, it isn't quite ; because Mavis has had such a good education, you see, on account of her Uncle and Aunt Jeffrey being in that line, and there's no way here for her to keep it up. There's no books, except those old ones in Wynn's room, and her own, that's mostly school prizes, and there's no way for her music unless it's the church hymns on Sundays. So, that,' added Mrs. Wynn, pulling herself up with a sudden consciousness that there was not much to interest a young gentleman in all this, ' is why it is not so good for her as it is for me. But I beg your pardon, Mr. Jack, for talking about it to you.'

' Not at all, not at all. Of course I quite see that it must be an awful bore for Miss Wynn to have no books and no piano ; but isn't that Miss Wynn coming from the far side of the field opposite ? In black, with a straw hat ? '

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Wynn, bending forward to follow the indication of his hand; ‘that is Mavis.’

Jack got into the boat without a word more, pulled across the stream, and advanced towards the figure coming slowly—for Mavis was reading a sheet of music as she walked—on the other side. Mrs. Wynn watched him as he neared the girl, unconscious of his presence, and, raising his hat, addressed her. Then she saw Mavis pause—they spoke together—and presently walked down to the water’s edge.

‘I have made free with your boat already once to-day,’ said Jack, ‘and now you must let me take you across.’

‘But who is to take you back again, for the boat must be housed?’ Mavis asked, with an unembarrassed smile. ‘We should be like the people who saw each other home until morning.’

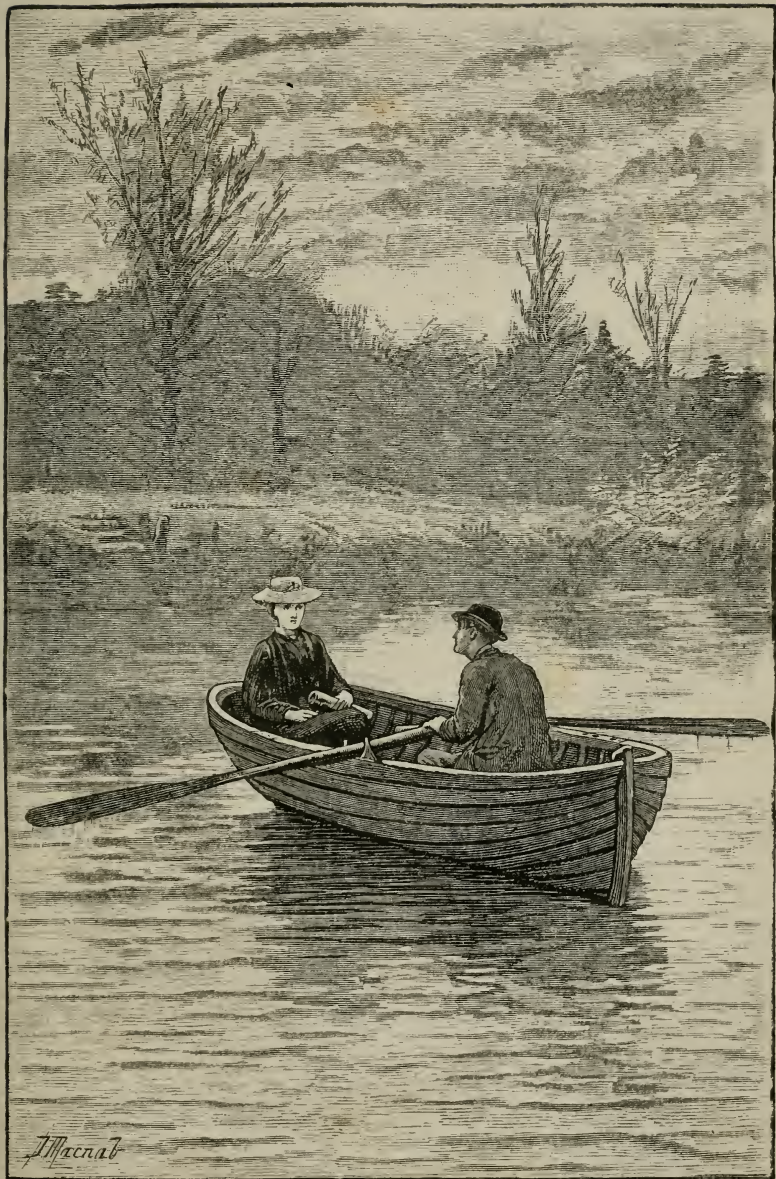
‘Not at all; I shall go back by the road.’

He placed her in the boat—it was pleasant to be thus waited on like a lady—she had been long enough at home to have her perceptions sharpened on that point—and they were presently in the middle of the little river.

Jack ceased to ply the sculls, and looked deliberately about him.

‘What a pity it’s so short a pull across,’ he said; ‘this is just the sort of day for a good row; a few minutes of it is only tantalising. Must I really take you straight over?’

Jack had discovered yesterday that Farmer Wynn’s daughter was very unlike what she might have been expected to be; he had now made the farther discovery that her eyes were of his favourite colour, and also that her speech was as sweet-toned as some other women’s singing. She had not uttered more than half a dozen sentences to him, but that did not matter at all; there are moods in which impressions are rapid, and there are natures on which all impressions are deeply made.



'In the middle of the little river.'

‘Mrs. Wynn is looking out for me,’ said Mavis, simply, ‘and there will be father’s tea to see to.’

How Jack hated Mavis’s father, and how he resented his tea! He could have ‘squared’ Mrs. Wynn easily, but there was impossibility in Mavis’s quiet reply. The idea of a girl like this one, with such eyes and such a voice, having to ‘see to’ anybody’s tea, aroused in Jack’s breast a sudden antagonism to the existing order of things.

He lingered about for some time after he had housed the boat, and talked in his youthful pleasant way. Mrs. Wynn and Mavis were, however, so uneasy and constrained that he could not fail to see it, and reluctantly took his departure, having made a formal appointment, subject to Farmer Wynn’s convenience, for the inspection of the pointer pup on the following day.

‘They were horribly uncomfortable about his coming home,’ thought Jack. ‘He has

always been pleased to see me at the farm, so it could not be that. I suspect he's a bit of a brute to that poor delicate wife of his. I wonder how he treats his daughter.'

It was surprising how hot and angry the doubt involved in this speculation made Jack Bassett feel. His visit to Fieldflower Farm was only an episode in the history of a momentous day in the young man's life; only an interval between the disclosure of the morning and the resolution and action which had to be taken as its consequence; a trifling incident hardly worth recording. In the time to come, however, when his recollection of the serious events of that day had grown dim, when he could not have quoted his father's words, or recalled his own sensations on hearing them, every trivial detail of that episode, every moment of that interval, every look, word, and gesture which had marked the insignificant interview between himself and Mavis Wynn was distinct and present to him. Who

is there that can define the strictly commonplace in his own life, or infallibly discern it in another's?

Mr. Bassett and his son had always been very good company for each other; for nothing that concerned or interested Jack could fail to occupy his father. They were even better company than usual that evening. Neither had now any concealment from the other, and this relief made itself felt at their cheerful *tête-à-tête* dinner, although the topic of the morning was not referred to until afterwards. Then the Squire told Jack that he intended to go up to London, and transact his business in person.

‘We will start together,’ said the Squire, ‘on Thursday; you can take me to Chester before you go to Trescoe Park.’

CHAPTER VIII.

EARLY DAYS.

ON the following day Jack Bassett walked over to Fieldflower Farm, accompanied by Trotty Veck, who was now convalescent. He wanted to see the pointer pup, being indeed unaccountably desirous of conciliating its owner, and he also wanted to see Mavis, and induce her to promise that she would come to the House and keep up her music by playing on the unused pianoforte. If he made her the invitation, he felt sure neither the Squire nor Miss Nestle would seriously oppose it, but he thought it more prudent to say nothing to Miss Nestle beforehand. He had a prophetic dread that she might propound her favourite axiom to either the Squire or himself as an objection.

There were the books, too ; he was glad Mrs. Wynn had mentioned Mavis's privations in that respect ; he would take her some books, and tell her that the contents of the library were at her disposal. What sort of reading did she like ? he wondered. There were lots of novels among the Bassett books, and the Squire took in the important serials. It was the golden prime of Dickens, and Thackeray was a world's wonder at that time. Jack, who was no reader, hoped that Mavis preferred Lever, as he did, and finally set off with 'Tom Burke of Ours' under his arm.

The first part of his mission sped fairly well. Wynn was in the farmyard, and he received the Squire's son with what stood for cordiality with him. He was indeed quite good-humoured, and not only took the visitor into the big parlour, but addressed his wife civilly with the remark that Mr. Jack had come to see her. Any reference to his daughter would have seemed superfluous to Wynn, even

had she been present, but she was not. The conversation went on in a constrained and halting manner, until a fortunate summons took the farmer away, when Jack boldly stated that he had brought some books for Miss Wynn, and also propounded his views about the piano.

‘It’s very kind indeed of you, Mr. Jack,’ said Mrs. Wynn, ‘and Mavis will be just delighted with the books; she misses them sorely, though it’s little time she has for reading.’

‘What has she to do, then?’

‘A many things, and pretty well all day long. Wynn isn’t one to like books about; he thinks reading is idle work for women; and as for the piano, I’m sure we’re very thankful for your thinking of such a thing—there’s few young gentlemen like you that would—but there would be no good in even mentioning it.’

‘Why?’ asked Jack, with an angry sparkle in his eyes. ‘I should have thought, from what you said yesterday, she would like it.’

‘So she would, but it isn’t her liking that’s the question. Wynn would never let her waste her time like that; it’s quite a wonder that he gave in about the singing in church.’

‘What’s the good of learning to play the piano, and then giving it up? Miss Wynn will forget it all if she doesn’t practise—at least I’ve heard that sort of thing said to girls,’ remonstrated Jack, with a burning consciousness that he was making a fool of himself; ‘and I suppose it’s the same for all of them.’

‘I suppose so; but Wynn thinks it does not matter about her losing the music. She only learned because her uncle was a teacher; she is nought but a farmer’s daughter, you know, Mr. Jack, and Wynn don’t want her to be above her station.’

‘But she is above her station, and Wynn can’t prevent it,’ said Jack, rashly; ‘she’s just as ladylike as she’s pretty, and clever, and—and that. It is a shame to try and keep her back. I’m sure you don’t wish to do it.’

‘No, I don’t indeed ; but I can’t go against Wynn, and I’m sure he wouldn’t hear of her going up to the House to play on the piano. Thank you, very much, all the same, sir, but I think none of us had better say anything about it.’

This was said so seriously, and with such an air of taking Jack into the speaker’s confidence, that he was immediately convinced. From that moment the image of Mavis, already sufficiently attractive to the young man, was invested with the additional charm lent by suspicion and dawning dislike of her father. The ‘bit of a brute’ theory of Farmer Wynn’s character was gaining confirmation in Jack’s mind.

‘Very well, then, I won’t,’ he said, reluctantly ; ‘but I am very sorry you think Miss Wynn cannot have this little pleasure. She isn’t in, I suppose?’ Jack put this question with so ridiculously unsuccessful an assumption of its having occurred to him to ask it quite accidentally, that it must have amused any one

with a sense of humour. Mrs. Wynn had none, and she answered in entire good faith : ‘No, she isn’t in. There’s a choir practice on Wednesdays at the parsonage, and Mavis is there.’

Jack took his leave after this with remarkable celerity, and wended his way towards the parsonage. He had no distinct notion of what he was about, for he could hardly hope to be admitted to the choir-practice. Fortune favoured him ; he met Mavis just as she was about to ascend the zigzag steps leading to the path across the fields, and there was no third person within sight to witness their meeting. He had walked very quickly—it was a good distance round by the road—and he greeted Mavis eagerly, congratulating himself on his good luck in not having missed her. Mavis was surprised, pleased, a little fluttered, and as Jack stepped up the bank before her, and offered her his hand to accomplish the easy ascent, while he reminded her that it was just there, but on the opposite side, he had seen her first, the

swift tinge of colour that occasionally lent a peculiar charm to her face passed over it. Jack Bassett said afterwards, and always believed, that at this precise moment he fell in love with Mavis Wynn; but he might have antedated the mischief.

They turned into the field path, and, without troubling themselves with any consideration as to whether it was the correct thing or not, they enjoyed a heavenly walk so far as the river bank. They talked, of course, and probably in a silly, disjointed, and unmeaning manner, but that was of no consequence at all. Trotty Veck, with a supercanine perception of the position, frisked about and supplied the two with a topic of interest. He plainly said to them: 'My dear, innocent, awkward young people, I brought you together, so to speak, and now you can make friends, and get over the preliminary stages, by admiring my sagacious eyes, my discriminating nose, and my commentative tail.'

They made some of those wonderful dis-

coveries, which, although not in themselves absolute novelties to the human race, are especial miracles to each successive couple that finds them out; for instance, that spring is a lovely season, that a walk in the fields is a delightful experience, that birds sing sweetly, and that the country is better to live in than the town. The girl and the young man found something more than this to say, no doubt, but these were their first confidences, and perhaps many of us could look back to a certain occasion, which, although it brought no impressions of greater moment than such futilities to our wise and clever selves, will remain, 'while memory holds her seat,' a recollection to be summoned up at will.

Jack did not fail to remind Mavis that she had promised Miss Nestle a second visit, and adding that there were lots of things in the old house which he would like to show to her himself, 'as she knew so much about art'—a pure but permissible assumption on Mr. Jack's part—he ventured to insinuate that it would be well

to wait until after his own return from Trescoe Park.

‘They’re sure to want me to stay the full week ; there’s always so much going on,’ said Jack. ‘I have never yet gone to the Park that I have not remained twice as long as I intended ; but this time I shan’t. I’m sure to be back on Saturday. Could you say Saturday for a look at the pictures ? ’

Mavis wore a broad-leaved straw hat which concealed her face rather provokingly, and besides, she happened to be attending to Trotty Veck, so that Jack could not see whether she looked sorry, but he thought her voice sounded sorry as she replied that she could not, because there was always a great deal to do at home on Saturdays. The words jarred on Jack’s ear, as Mrs. Wynn’s reference to the household tasks of Mavis had jarred. He had only the vaguest notions of what these household tasks might be ; but a combination of the occupations of the print-gowned, white-capped handmaidens whom

Miss Nestle kept so rigidly in their place, and those of the red-armed Welsh girls whom he had seen about the farm, presented itself to his imagination, and filled him with wrath. This, if he had been a wise young man, ought to have put him on his guard; for, after all, what affair was it of his that the graceful, fair-faced girl by whose side he was walking, whose every tone was musical, and her speech more choice and correct than his own, was, as her step-mother had said, 'nought but a farmer's daughter,' and had no place at all among the refined scenes in which Jack seemed to see her, an ornament and a harmony? What though the shapely hands at which he cast a pained look, had to twirl a sweeping brush or to feed calves—two possibilities that had presented themselves to Jack's mind—instead of putting through them the elegant industries of ladies' lives, what business was that of Jack Bassett's? As, however, he was not a wise young man, these rational questions did not occur to him.

‘On Sunday, then?’ asked Jack, but was again denied.

Permission to attend and sing at the morning and evening services was the sole privilege which the day of rest brought to Mavis. This was vexatious; but, as Jack was aware that the farmer never went to church, he immediately formed a subtle plan for meeting Mavis and Mrs. Wynn in the fields, and walking home to the farm with them. He could hardly persevere farther in his attempts to get Mavis to name a day for her second visit to Miss Nestle. His perceptions were quickened by his distrust of Wynn; he saw that she could not give an answer of her own free will, and, with all his youthful selfishness, he was too true a gentleman to place her in a painful or awkward position.

By the time the river-side came in view, and the useful little craft—ungratefully designated in Jack’s thoughts ‘that odious boat’—was reached, Mavis and her escort had contrived to

find out more of each other's minds. Mavis knew that a soldier, and nothing but a soldier, Squire Bassett's son would be, and unspeakable was her admiration of his noble resolve, while she had no idea of what would be involved in the carrying out of it—for Jack had even yet sufficient discretion left to keep the family troubles to himself. Jack knew that the death of the girl's best friends had forced Mavis to abandon the hope of making an independence by the exercise of her musical gifts. She told him this very simply and frankly, as if it must of necessity be quite final, and Jack had a guilty feeling of satisfaction on hearing it. He had either inherited or acquired many of his father's notions, and among them a great dislike to any kind of publicity, even the most honourable, for women. Again, had he been wise, he might have taken warning; for what business of his was it whether the daughter of Farmer Wynn did or did not become a public singer?

‘Don’t be disappointed about it,’ he said eagerly, ‘you would never have liked it: indeed, I am sure you never could have done it. I could not imagine you on a stage with a lot of actors, and a crowd staring at you and discussing you.’

‘I could not imagine that myself,’ said Mavis, smiling. ‘My uncle did not hope that I should ever be equal to anything beyond concert-singing. I daresay I should never have had courage even for that. At all events, I must think of it no more.’

They had come to the river-side, where the boat was made fast to the post. The harbour was unoccupied; the Dame’s Parlour-side presented a sunny, solitary aspect; on the roof sat peaceful pigeons; no near sound was to be heard except the pleasant ripple of the water under the boat’s keel. Trotty Veck jumped into the little craft with a joyful bark as his master laid his hand on the rope to loose it. Jack turned an entreating look on Mavis.

‘ You’ll let me take you across ? ’

‘ No, thank you.’ She looked over to the far side of the stream with the same anxious expression that Jack had already noticed ; ‘ I would rather not.’

‘ Come out, sir, you’re not to go,’ said Jack to Trotty, sharply. Trotty obeyed, but under protest ; and then, with a touch of the cruelty of his sex and age, Jack took a stately leave of Mavis, who, as he was well aware, could not do otherwise than refuse his request. Having seen her pull off, he took the return path with ostentatious haste.

‘ I have offended him,’ thought Mavis, the tears springing to her eyes ; ‘ and he has been so kind. But I could not help it ; how could I tell what sort of humour my father might be in, or what he would have said ? ’

Before she had time to say anything to her stepmother about the little adventure of her homeward walk, Mrs. Wynn began to tell her

of Mr. Jack's visit, and that he had brought some books for her.

'I put them in your cupboard,' said Mrs. Wynn, in the confidential tone that had been established by their mutual explanation. 'It's just as well your father shouldn't see them. Lord knows how he'd take it; we cannot tell. Be quick, dear, and get your things off; you're wanted in the dairy.'

Mavis did as her gentle stepmother bade her, but she snatched two minutes to look at 'Tom Burke of Ours,' just to glance at a few of the dashing illustrations, and to think that Mr. Jack would make as fine a figure in his beautiful uniform, and be as brave a soldier, as any of those gallant gentlemen. Her father's voice calling her put the splendid vision to flight; she hurriedly replaced the book, and obeyed the summons.

'So you've done your squalling, have you?'—thus Farmer Wynn addressed his daughter—'and can make yourself useful.' He had called

her into the small room in which his business was transacted, and was standing by a table with a bundle of papers in his hand.

‘I was going to help Rebecca in the dairy.’

‘Rebecca be—— I tell you I want you here. Sit down at my desk and copy this.’

‘Yes, father,’ said Mavis, obediently, but she was more than usually hurt by Wynn’s way of speaking to her. The sweet taste of courtesy and homage to her womanhood still lingered with her, and, because of it, this daily and hourly presented cup of coarse unkindness was additionally revolting. The paper was an inventory of house furniture and fittings, and Mavis made the required copy diligently. She had just completed her task when her father came back into the room, and she handed him the paper.

‘That will do,’ he said. ‘Now be off—I’m busy.’

Mavis, only too glad to be dismissed, re-

joined Mrs. Wynn, and told her of the task her father had set her.

‘What can he want of another list?—inventory it’s called at the top of the paper,’ said Mavis.

‘Goodness knows. If it was only the Dame’s Parlour-side furniture, it would look like that Reckitts buying it, as you thought; but it’s all the furniture, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, there’s everything in it, upstairs room and all.’

‘Then it can’t be *that*,’ said Mrs. Wynn, with her usual sigh of acquiescence in her own ignorance of all that might be supposed to concern her most; ‘and it’s no use thinking about it.’

The Squire and his son left Bassett on the following Thursday; the former for London, the latter for Trescoe Park. A large and merry party was assembled there, including two young fellows of Jack’s acquaintance who had just got their commissions. Utter indifference

to what they were going to do in life had not then come into fashion among young Englishmen, and these two boys were very full of 'the Service.' Jack was perhaps strengthened in his resolution to return home on Saturday, by feeling that the sudden obscuring of his own prospects, and the vagueness of his own future, made it hard for him to join with due heartiness in their exultant discourse. At all events, he was not to be tempted to remain by the evident disappointment of Caroline and Jane Trescoe, two young ladies, who had never taken any particular notice of him on previous occasions, except to make him feel himself, like David Copperfield, 'remarkably young.' He was not even flattered by the testimony to complete recognition of his young-manhood that reached him from every side; the men of the party admitting him to their society as readily as did the ladies. He was thinking of quite other matters: occasionally, to do him justice, of his father, and the puzzling problem

of the future, but almost continuously of Mavis Wynn.

On the Sunday morning Jack heard from his father. The Squire had taken up his quarters at the house of Mr. Dexter, who would not hear of his staying alone at an hotel, and he was likely to be detained in London for at least a fortnight. In the meantime, he should be too busy for much writing, but Jack was to keep up his heart, for Mr. Dexter 'saw his way.'

Jack was well pleased with this communication. Any of us who have ever been young, and have not quite forgotten what it feels like, will not be shocked to learn that he was very glad of a fortnight's freedom from having to face the trouble of the time, and also to have plenty of leisure, without fear of being called to account for his employment of it.

The ensuing fortnight was a pleasant but dangerous time to Jack Bassett and Mavis Wynn. Beautiful weather, nothing particular

to do, some painful thoughts to get rid of, and an interval of suspense to live through; these were all incentives to Jack's already pronounced inclination to meet his fair neighbour as often as he could contrive to do so on any pretext which commended itself to him as reasonable. In this respect he allowed himself a good deal of latitude, and displayed not a little ingenuity; for although his frequent errands to Field-flower Farm had Farmer Wynn for their ostensible object, he contrived to time his visits so as not to find the farmer on the home premises.

It has been said that Jack was not of a scheming disposition in general, but as frank and above-board a young fellow as one who has never suffered the indignity of distrust ought to be; yet was he no more consistently incorruptible than the rest of us. Surprisingly soon after the occasion of the choir practice at the parsonage—well within the first of the two weeks—he had begun to feel that a day with-

out the chance of seeing Mavis in it would be drawn blank, and was to be avoided by all means.

Circumstances favoured Jack. For some reason with which nobody but himself was acquainted, Farmer Wynn was more frequently away from the farm than his wife had ever previously known him to be, and he was also unusually disposed to leave his womankind at peace and to their own devices. Provided that his commands, usually issued at breakfast-time, were punctually fulfilled, and he never called for anything without its being instantly forthcoming, he did not trouble the big parlour much with his presence during these halcyon days. Mrs. Wynn enjoyed them, although always with the prescient proviso that they were much too good to last. In the afternoon Wynn was either absent, or shut up in his own room ; in the evening he devoted himself to the unfamiliar occupation of reading, and pored over the books which he had borrowed

from the Squire with the deepest attention, while his wife and daughter plodded in silence at their needlework.

The afternoon absences of the farmer were revealed by Mrs. Wynn to Jack, when on the day following the choir practice he presented himself on dog-business, and had a delightful hour in the big parlour with Mavis. Jack did not appear to pay any attention to Mrs. Wynn's remark, but he reckoned on these precious occasions, and thenceforth had a pretext ready, until the time came when no pretext at all was offered or required.

'Tom Burke of Ours' proved very successful. The pleasure which Mavis took in that wild, witty, and pathetic story ; her enthusiasm about the Peninsular war scenes, her delight with the Irish incidents, her agitated questioning, 'Can it be true? Did anything like that ever really happen?' when they talked of Father Tom's drive through the mountains to the rebel's death-bed, were all wonderfully

charming to Jack, who took immense pleasure in these tales of war, love, and adventure. He had hitherto been rather inarticulate in ladies' society, but it was surprising how easy he found it to talk to Mavis about all his likes and dislikes, and how much she was interested in what he said. To be sure, she did make the silly mistake of treating his time at Sandhurst as school, and his grinding as lessons, which rather checked him for a minute, with a dreadful suspicion that she might possibly be laughing at him ; but the simple seriousness in the face of Mavis dispelled his apprehension quickly. Girls never know about things of that kind—how should they ? It was very nice of her to care to hear—that was more than most of them would, Jack thought, with the free generalisation of his time of life. On this occasion there was none of the constraint and uneasiness in her manner, or that of her stepmother, which he had previously observed, and his suspicion that the difference was caused

by the absence of Wynn was confirmed by Mrs. Wynn's remark.

The last object in his vicinity which it would have occurred to Farmer Wynn to observe was his daughter's countenance. Had this been otherwise, he might have marked a change in Mavis's fair, sweet, too serious face, as she bent, evening after evening, over her needlework, in the light of the old-fashioned oil lamp, while he occupied one of the big horsehair-covered chairs by the fireside, with his feet up on a second. He might have seen the slight but lovely smile that occasionally parted her lips, the quick light that occasionally shone in her eyes, the brisk movement of her needle, the look of something to think about that engaged and pleased her, shortening the time, and obscuring the actual scene. There was music sounding somewhere, to which the girl was hearkening; there was a vision, and the eyes of her soul saw it.

Had Mavis been reminded of the fit of

despair that had come upon her only so few days before, in the Dame's Parlour, she would have wondered at herself, blamed herself for being so foolish, for thinking so ill of Providence, life, and the beautiful world, and fearing her fate so much.

Jack Bassett's days were pleasant on the whole for a young gentleman who had substantial troubles in the present, and no very bright prospects for the future. He was popular in the neighbourhood, and he had friends in a regiment then quartered at Chester. On most evenings his dogcart conveyed him to a pleasant dinner at some friend's house within a few miles ; but he returned home at night with exemplary regularity, and he joined no parties of an afternoon.

It was impossible to Jack to take books out of the legitimate library without Miss Nestle's knowledge, but he was not prepared to be found out in extracting some from the goodly store of novels in the Squire's book-room.

One day, as he stepped out of the glass door, with three volumes under his arm, he was confronted by Miss Nestle, who had been looking after Jacob, by special desire of the Squire. Perfectly respectful but peculiarly disconcerting was the look which Miss Nestle darted, first at the books, and then at Jack.

‘Hallo! Nesty, who’d have thought of seeing you at this side of the house?’ said Jack, with overdone effusion. ‘What have you been about?’

‘I have been taking some sugar and a store-apple to Jacob, Mr. John, by the Squire’s orders, received this morning,’ answered Miss Nestle, with prim precision.

‘Mr. John’ was a signal corresponding to the hoisting of a storm drum.

‘Just like him to remember the donkey in the midst of his business,’ said Jack, heartily. ‘I ought to have taken his sugar and apple to Jacob. Where is he?—with the cart?’

‘On the third rose walk, at the east corner,

near the laburnum trees'—Miss Nestle was still eyeing the books, and Jack had not presence of mind to nod and leave her.

'Well, you've given him as much as is good for him for to-day. I'm off to Field-flower Farm, to see about the pointer pup—I'd rather Robert took him in hands now, so I shall ask Wynn to send him up this evening—and I'm taking Miss Wynn some books. They're wretchedly off in that way at the farm.'

Miss Nestle's features settled themselves in her disc-like countenance into an expression of disapproval as she said :

'Of course you know best, Mr. John, but what Mavis Wynn can want with story-books, now that she's settled down at the Farm, I can't tell. It's no kindness to make people discontented, or to put them out of their place ; and a farmer's daughter don't ought to idle over story-books as if she was a lady. What I say is, if you keep your own place every

one will respect you, and you can respect yourself.'

With this, Miss Nestle would have gone into the house, but that Jack, whom her words had made extremely uncomfortable, detained her.

'Wait a minute, Nesty,' he said, 'and don't be cross. Why do you talk about Miss Wynn as if she were just like the other farmers' daughters? She isn't, you know; she's been highly educated, and her mother was a gentleman's daughter—was she not?'

Thus artfully did Jack avail himself of an untoward incident to get the information that he wanted.

'Mr. Warne was a gentleman of a queer sort; for he ran through all his property in betting and horse-racing and such like wickedness, and left his wife and children to want and woe. The poor lady did not live long, and the children, so I heard from Mavis's mother, were brought up in a school to be teachers, poor things.'

Jack had by this time tacitly beguiled Miss Nestle into walking along the terrace with him. The housekeeper was inflexible on her official side only, and now, old recollections, probably of pity and help, softened her reproving countenance.

‘How came one of Mrs. Warne’s daughters to marry Wynn?’

‘That I cannot tell you, Mr. Jack’—he felt things were coming right again—‘I never heard it rightly; but I suppose there was no one else to marry her, and being put out of her place already, through the doings of her father, she very likely did not feel it so much.’

‘You knew her? What sort of person was she?’

‘Mavis is as like her as two peas, if one was dark and the other was fair; and she speaks like her. But Mrs. Wynn never did much good at the farm; she never took to it, and’—with a sudden return to her former attitude—

‘neither will Mavis, take my word for it, Mr. John, if you go putting notions into her head when she ought to be settling down.’

They had reached the end of the house, and Miss Nestle came to a standstill.

‘Never mind, Nesty,’ said Jack, persuasively ; ‘I shall not be here to give Miss Wynn notions, as you call it, very long ; or to lend her books ; but she must have these, you know, because I told her I should bring them. I dare say you often did her mother a kindness when things were not too pleasant for her. So I’m off ! Look out for the pointer pup.’

He ran lightly down the terrace steps, turned into the shrubbery that bounded the rose garden, and was out of sight before Miss Nestle had done shaking her cap at him.

‘What a pity the dear boy isn’t more like the Squire !’ thought Miss Nestle, as she retraced her steps, ‘content to be quiet at home, instead of wanting to be off to the wars

again, or I ought to say, the first time, like the person in the song, who hung his harp on a willow-tree. But'—here Miss Nestle nodded sharply two or three times—‘as he won't be satisfied unless he can be put in the way of killing his fellow-creatures, I shan't be sorry if he gets the chance soon. I think well of Mr. Jack, very well; but he don't keep himself in his place so strict and constant as the Squire does, and I don't hold with girls having their heads turned.’

CHAPTER IX.

‘THIS SPRING OF LOVE.’

THE memorable year that broke up the tradition of peace, only a short time after its great commemoration, formed an epoch in the life of England whose importance will probably be rated in the future even more highly than it is by us, who have seen how far and how fast the ball that was then set rolling has since rolled. To all who remember it with grown-up memory, the first year of the Crimean war stands apart as an epoch at which a great change passed upon men's minds, and the subjects of main interest to them were largely multiplied and magnified. The young people of those days learned to understand the Waterloo time, and the feelings of their predecessors

of that glorious period ; while the political field of vision widened out in a surprising fashion, to go on widening at accumulating speed ever since.

Some day, a great writer, an historian and philosopher, with the accuracy proper to the one and the calm proper to the other, with the fine insight of a poet, and the love of form of an artist, with the soul of a patriot, and rich in treasures of experience, will set down the story of ' the fifties ' veracious and entire. Then the English people of that day will learn, better than we who have lived in and near it can know, how wonderful, great, and ominous a decade that was.

With the historic events that were ushered in by the spring of 1854, we are concerned but transiently, and for the sole reason that the outer edge of the great whirlpool, created by the flinging of the Titanic stone of offence into the long-unruffled waters of European peace, stretched far enough to draw

within its swirl the quiet people with whom this humble tale has to do. It is permissible to borrow a phrase from a great master, and to say, as Mr. Thackeray said of his immortal narrative, 'Vanity Fair,' that the place of this story, while the battle rages, and the fate of countries and kings hangs on its award, 'is with the non-combatants below.'

When Squire Bassett spoke to Mr. Dexter about 'the chances' on which young men of Jack's way of thinking were then calculating, he alluded, of course, to the war between Russia and the allied Powers which had just been declared. What Jack called the glorious luck of the oncoming of war was calculated to confirm his resolution. The Squire and the lawyer contemplated this matter each from his separate point of view: Mr. Bassett with distaste, indeed, but with a single-hearted desire to let his son have his own way; Mr. Dexter with regret and impatience. Concerning those chances Mr. Dexter was sceptical; the prizes that were to

be snatched by happy hazard, or laboriously climbed for, were not numerous, and the matter presented itself to him in the most prosaic light.

‘It is just like the technical talk with which they cover up the horrors, the miseries, the cruelty, and the waste of war,’ thought the lawyer; ‘their advances, operations, evolutions, steady fire, closing up, falling back in good order, charging, and all the rest of it. What does the simplest bit of all that jargon imply but suffering to man and beast, a woeful waste of precious life and hard-earned money, all incurred for the attainment of some object to be cheerfully relinquished by the next generation? There were “chances” for the young fellows when the Emperor of Russia helped us to beat “Boney”; there are chances for the young fellows now that “Boney’s” nephew is going to help us to beat the Emperor of Russia; and the meaning of both sets of “chances” is “dead men’s shoes.”’

Mr. Dexter, being thus insensible to the claims of glory, and ruthlessly realistic in his views, was not sympathetic with the Squire in his quest of the realisation of Jack's heart's desire ; but he was none the less useful. Once convinced that his friend's son was of the number of those who ' will to Cupar,' and therefore ' maun to Cupar,' he would do all in his power to set that ill-judging young man, mounted and provisioned for the journey, on the way to Cupar. The Squire having told him on his arrival in London that there was no doing anything with Jack, Mr. Dexter at once proceeded to act upon this assurance, in his own department of Mr. Bassett's affairs, while the Squire went to work in another.

The result of the exertions of the two friends proved satisfactory, and was attained with greater facility than the Squire had anticipated.

The fortnight had not quite expired when Mr. Bassett sent his son news that suddenly

changed the aspect of affairs. The Squire's communication was received by the aspirant to military glory with less pleasure than that wherewith Jack would have welcomed similar intelligence when he bade the Squire good-bye at the Chester railway station.

* * * * *

The long casements of the Dame's Parlour commanded, as we have seen, a view of the little river and its opposite bank. It would be both vain and unfair to ask how soon Mavis Wynn's interest in that prospect attached itself to the tolerably punctual appearance of Mr. John Bassett hard by the spot at which the boat was now regularly to be found for his convenience.

The boy, for whom Mavis had looked in vain on a certain recent day, never to lose its importance in her memory, was readily forthcoming when it occurred to Mr. Jack that it would be convenient and expedient to make his visits to Fieldflower Farm by way of the

river. The red-cheeked, black-haired, beady-eyed boy, Reuben Jones, who held a nondescript position at the farm, undertook to be on the look-out for Mr. Jack of afternoons, to take the boat across for him, and likewise to row it back to the boathouse after Jack's departure. If Reuben ever wondered why Mr. John Bassett did not make his visits to the farm like other people, walking up the avenue, and sitting gravely in the big parlour where the Sunday tea-set and the family Bible abode, and if he guessed aright at the reason, it was doubtless with sweet and soothing satisfaction. The beady-eyed boy disliked his master so heartily that it actually freshened up his faculties to be called upon to use them presumably against Wynn.

So the spring days crept on ; their keenness was beginning to be tempered by that sweetness whose only parallel has been found for it by the greatest of poets. To Mavis all their meaning was that each would surely bring

Jack to the river-side, and to Jack, that among the hours of every one of them some would be passed in the blissful company of Farmer Wynn's daughter. Every day, Jack and Trotty Veck made their little voyage in the boat, and the young man and the girl sat and talked in the harbour, or walked on the smooth sward under the grey fortress wall, or along the river's edge, while Trotty sedulously sought the society of Mrs. Wynn, feeling, but with a magnanimous absence of bitterness, that his own was less welcome than formerly.

On two or three occasions Jack had seen the farmer, but Wynn had made no sign of surprise, displeasure, or curiosity; he merely exchanged a few sentences with the Squire's son, and went about his business.

Mrs. Wynn hardly knew herself—to use her own expression—in the cheerful atmosphere created by Jack's mere presence. It was 'lovely,' she thought, to hear the pleasant talk of the two; although there was a great

deal of it that she did not understand. Their walks were extended daily, while the river-side arbour or the big parlour saw less and less of Jack and Mavis. They left her with ever-shortening apologies, it is true; but she had never before been so well treated, so nearly restored to self-respect, or so little tormented with fear and distress on account of Mavis.

Mrs. Wynn had not a mother's instinct to quicken her perception where Mavis was concerned. She was sorry, when she was obliged to think of it, that the end of this pleasant change in the life of Fieldflower Farm must come so soon. Mr. Jack would have to go off to the place where the other grand officers were (Mrs. Wynn's notion of the war and its locality was equal to old John Willet's in clearness), and then it would be as dull as ever for Mavis. Thus did Mrs. Wynn—who had never been in love in her life, and whose always slow mind was becoming more inert under the influence of illness, of which she dared not

complain—regard a state of things, fraught, as ordinary common sense should have taught her, with danger to the one being in the world whom she loved. That, however retired and unneighbourly the ways of Fieldflower Farm were, other people might hear and talk of Mr. Jack's assiduities, and the breath of scandal taint the fair fame of Mavis, no more occurred to Mrs. Wynn than that the 'end of it' might mean a broken heart and a wasted life to her stepdaughter. Mrs. Wynn carried a broken heart in her own breast, but love had had nothing to do with its fracture; nor indeed hate, which will sometimes work a like ill and desolation; but only sheer tyranny and constant fear.

Jack had been made free of the Dame's Parlour, whither he had conveyed quite a little collection of the Bassett books. The quaint old rooms pleased him; his fancy, not over-quick or much indulged, had shared in the

awakening of his feelings, and all things lent themselves to—

The one unequalled pure romance.

The farm-side would perhaps have fed it as effectually, though otherwise; but the ancient, quiet, solemn, tapestried rooms, their spare, bygone furniture, and the exquisite neatness that pervaded them—this, indeed, Mavis had the art of maintaining wherever she had any control—formed a frame for the fair image of his first love which had a great charm for Jack.

It was in the Dame's Parlour that he first heard Mavis sing; after he had endured a twinge of something—it could not be jealousy, he was sure, because that would be foolish, but it was at all events unpleasant—because others had the privilege of hearing that sweet music, and not he. So he asked Mavis to sing to him; and she, being entirely free from coquetry or affectation, consented to do so, but

said that only certain hymns, and a few songs that were real poetry, were pleasing without an accompaniment. Jack positively hated Miss Nestle as he thought of the 'beautiful piece of rosewood' at home, and eagerly assured Mavis that her voice needed no accessory. She sang to him, and Jack listened with strange, almost painful, pleasure, and a sudden consciousness that hitherto he had never known what music meant. He made her no florid compliments, but the look with which he thanked the singer set her heart beating quickly, and took away from her the power of answering him.

'Yes,' said Mrs. Wynn, simply, as if Jack had spoken to her; 'it is the kind of singing that does one good. Her Uncle Jeffrey thought a deal of her voice.'

'No wonder,' was Jack's only comment. He was rather silent after this, and went away earlier than usual. It was a rainy day, and there had been no walk by the river-side.

From the Dame's Parlour, where he had

taken leave of her, Mavis looked out at Jack, as he crossed the river and took his way through the fields. As she lost sight of him a thought came to her that carried with it a keen and dreadful pang. He would soon vanish out of her life, as he had but now passed beyond her vision, and what should she do, what should she be then? Her step-mother's remarking that they had better see to the tea seemed to wake her from a dream, and she looked around with a sort of terror of the closing up again of the walls of her prison-house. They had fallen apart; she had seen wonderful visions beyond them, and now at the same moment there come to her the meaning of those visions, and also the chill certainty that she must part with them.

Mavis had, however, to rouse herself and go to her prosaic occupations, and this was well. Her father came in wet and surly; in a mood to kick the dogs and bully the women. He indulged his mood, and when Mavis got away

to her own room that night, a great bewilderment fell upon her. She was very young in years, but much older in mind, as such an experience as hers must have made any one who was not a fool; she was helpless, and yet the sole help of another more pitiable still. A deep sense of humiliation possessed her, and under, over, above, all round those racking thoughts, was the agony of knowledge that the brightness and the sweetness which had changed all her life for a few short days must go out of it, and leave it darker and more bitter than before. This had been true from the very first gleam of that brightness, from the very first taste of that sweetness, but she had not felt it until to-day; she had been so content! What was this dreadful pain? What had happened to her that she should feel so wretched, and that the doom under which she must live had become more than ever intolerable? Why had her heart died within her that evening? Why had her flesh crept with shame and repulsion, when

Wynn used language to his wife and daughter not more vile and violent than they had endured many times before?

‘Oh,’ she sobbed, as she knelt in the moonlight beside her little bed and hid her face in her hands, ‘he’s a gentleman, a gentleman; and how can I be treated in this way, and live this life, and yet bear to look at him; to let him respect me as if I were the first lady in the land? But, oh! how am I to bear it when he is gone away? It will be worse then, far worse. The days without a sight of him, the weeks and months, and all this to suffer, without a word or a look of his. . . .’

When Jack Bassett came to the river-side next day, he found the boat ready for him as usual, but Reuben was sitting on the bank eating bread and cheese. He scrambled to his feet and bolted a huge mouthful, as Jack came up and asked him why he was waiting.

‘Please sir,’ answered Reuben, ‘I was to tell you that Missis is bad with a headache, and

she hasn't come down to-day, and Miss Mavis is done with these.'

So saying he ducked into the boat and produced a couple of volumes. Jack took them with a frown.

'That means that I am not to come across to-day; but why? No matter, I must and I will. Get in,' said he to Reuben; 'I'm going across.'

The door in the wall of the Dame's-Parlour-side was ajar. Jack walked in unceremoniously, and found Mavis, as he expected, in the parlour. She had seen him cross the river, despite her implied prohibition, and she knew that the impending meeting must be unlike any that had gone before it. The scene of yesterday, and the self-revelation that succeeded it, had unnerved Mavis; and now, as she stood by the casement with one hand on the broad sill and the other clasping her forehead, while she strove for the composure which his rapid step upon the stair put utterly to flight, she was pale and trembling.

In a minute he was in the room. Her hand fell from her brow, and she tried to speak like her ordinary self, but she saw that a change had passed on him too. There was a brighter light in his eyes, he looked less boyish, more commanding, and in his first words of greeting there was a deeper tone.

‘ You did not want me to come to-day—why ? ’

‘ I—Mrs. Wynn is not well—I thought——’

‘ Something has happened. What is it ? ’

She had been standing by the window, but a great carved chair was near, and she seated herself without answering. How could she tell him what had happened, the scene with her father, or the later strife of her own thoughts ? His eyes were searching her face for the reply to his question ; their look was strangely keen and lofty, and her heart beat quickly, hurried by the sense of something impending. She leaned her head against the back of the chair, her chestnut curls lay soft and bright against

the rigid heraldic device in old black oak, and Jack thought he had never seen her look so fair.

‘Something has happened since yesterday. What is it?’ he repeated. ‘Will you not tell me? Why did you try to prevent me from coming? Why did you not want to see me to-day? What have I done?’

‘You—done—Mr. Bassett?’ stammered Mavis, with a deep blush; ‘nothing indeed. It was not on account of you.’

‘I am glad of that,’ said Jack, guessing at the truth. ‘I would not have you offended with me, or not care to see me, for the world.’ The phrase was very commonplace, but it was poetry and music combined to Mavis’s ears.

‘I could not have obeyed you, though I knew well enough what your message meant. I could not have let the day pass without seeing you. I have something to tell you—something about myself.’

He was standing near her chair, and he

laid his arm upon the back of it, and spoke the next words bending slightly towards her. A mist passed before her eyes. Was he going away? or was it—was it the great lady whom, according to her stepmother, he was to marry, and of whom she had never thought once in all these happy days? But almost with the suggestion came the conviction that it was not *that*.

‘I am going away. My father has settled everything for me, and desires me to join him in London with as little delay as possible. I shall be gazetted to the Rifle Brigade in a few days, and am to join the regiment at once.’

At his first words she had quivered all over; this was the realisation of the dread that had fallen upon her last night. The answer to her question, ‘What shall I do then? what shall I be?’ would now come soon enough. She could not speak; no matter what he might think of her silence, she could not speak.

He bent his head more towards her, and went on, with some hurry in his voice :

‘ Do you know where I shall be going to ? ’

No words, but the movement of her eyelids answered him. She did not know, but she feared.

‘ To the seat of war. We are ordered out to Gallipoli. It is a splendid chance for me. My father got it all settled, and never said anything until it was done. Don’t look so shocked ; you knew I was going to be a soldier—always.’

‘ Yes—but not—not that you were going to fight.’

‘ Ah, but that’s my grand luck, you see, and my father’s good friends ; he knows a lot of people, though he lives out of the world. This is what I came to tell you—this, and a great deal more.’

‘ You—you are glad ? ’

‘ Of course I am glad.’ He drew himself up proudly for a moment, with a passing look of surprise, but it yielded to one of his pecu-

liarly bright smiles. He resumed his former attitude, and went on speaking, blending, in a very manly and attractive way, deference to the woman with the soothing manner in which he might have quieted a child.

‘But I am sorry too. You know why, do you not? You know what I have to leave! Mavis, you know that I love you!’

On his bended knee beside her, in the good old style of lover’s wooing, drawing away the hands that she clasped before her eyes, and holding them tightly in his own, Jack begged, right humbly for all his hopefulness, and with a simple eloquence that became him well, for the one great boon, which possessing he should have no more to ask of fate.

What did Mavis say to him? Very few and simple words, and spoken with difficulty. To her lover’s ears those words had the grandeur and glory of the proclamation of a king’s coming to his kingdom; for they were, ‘I think I loved you first.’

The girl raised her serene eyes to her young lover's, and their pure and trustful appeal was so sacred and beautiful, that it filled his heart with a great transport of love and fidelity. She seemed newly, doubly, dear and divine to him. He had hoped, he had meant, he had willed to win her ; but now that she was won, he was so amazed at his great joy that it seemed like some other, unimagined, and the kiss that sealed the promise by which they bound themselves to each other for time and eternity, to mark the beginning of a new life.

They were so young and so happy, it was no wonder that on the first hours of their acknowledged love no shadow of doubt or misgiving fell, and even that of imminent parting held aloof. That their first confidences were like those of many myriads of their like since time began, and love with it, who can doubt? It is no less certain that to them they were as simply marvellous, and

apart from all the experiences of humanity, as if they had been exchanged by creatures of a different race, in another planet. For the girl the whole face of the earth was changed. What had become of the questions she had asked herself—‘What should she be? What should she do?’ She was to be Jack’s betrothed, and she was to love him, in every moment of her beatified existence, with all her heart and soul, and so to grow worthy—if such worthiness were indeed possible—to be his wife when he should come for her.

What harm could any one do her now? With that hope set before her, what was there she could not bear, and keep it from her true lover’s knowledge, lest it should distress him? Humiliation and fear had no more hold upon her; at the touch of the great magician they fell away like the burst bonds of a captive. He loved her; she was safe for evermore. It was not, however, in the first hour of that wonderful bliss which, for every woman worthy

of the name who has known it, transforms the world, that Mavis thought of these things at all. In the intensity and wonder of her happiness, external things seemed lost; it was of Jack only she could think, of Jack who loved her, to whom she belonged henceforth. A great gulf lay between to-day, when she knew that this was so, and yesterday, when she had known only that she loved him, and that she should soon see him no more; a great gulf in which a load of trouble and dread was buried out of sight and out of mind.

The lovers had not much time on the supremest day of their lives for the concerting of plans, or for the comparing of notes upon the successive chapters of the ever-new old story, that form an early and delightful stage of that madness which is so much better than sanity. Jack had an engagement at home, and Mavis had to perform Mrs. Wynn's tasks in addition to her own. Each felt, though neither said so, that no risk of Jack's meeting Wynn must be

incurred on that day. The one indication of the future, given by Jack to Mavis in the midst of the sweet love-talk of those blissful hours, was in the sentence : ' We must keep our secret quite to ourselves for the present.' There would have been no keeping of the secret from any one who could have seen the young man and the girl, with the light of love in their faces, as Mavis waved a farewell to Jack from the quaint old casement of the Dame's Parlour, which, in its time, had framed many a fair and smiling, many a weary and woe-worn face, and he saluted her as reverently and gallantly as though his wideawake had been a plumed beaver, and the young lover a knight of old.

' I thought you were never coming, Mavis,' said poor Mrs. Wynn, with unusual querulousness, when her stepdaughter appeared in the room. ' Where have you been? Have you got the cheeses rubbed? There will be such a to-do if that's not been seen to; and my head's been so bad, I forgot all about it until

just this minute. How I'm to get up, I don't know.'

'Don't hurry,' said Mavis, as she collected Mrs. Wynn's garments, 'there's an hour yet before tea-time. The cheeses have been rubbed; there's nothing neglected. But'—she came nearer and looked sharply at her step-mother—'you don't look fit to be up at all. I am sure you are really ill. Don't get up, Sarah; stay where you are, and I will ask father to send for Dr. Williams.'

'Oh no!—for goodness' sake don't do that; if you had heard how he went on at me over the Christmas bill, you wouldn't wonder that I would suffer anything rather than have what I cost him thrown at me.'

'But if you get really ill for want of knowing what to do for yourself,' persisted Mavis, who had to be very plain of speech with Mrs. Wynn, 'there won't be any saving in that, you know.'

'No, I suppose there won't; but Wynn

must be left to see it for himself. I often think—indeed, I feel sure——’ But here she paused, perceiving that although Mavis was standing near with some of her clothes on her arm she was not listening, but was smiling absently at some thought of her own. The patient woman left the sentence unfinished, and with a tired sigh began to dress herself.

Mavis longed to tell Mrs. Wynn what great joy had come into her own life. She did thorough justice to her stepmother by the conviction that the intelligence would be a great consolation to her in the trouble which it could not actually touch. But she resisted the strong temptation : until Jack gave her leave to reveal it, the secret of her happiness should be untold. Her resolution was the more difficult to keep that Farmer Wynn relieved the two women of his presence for the whole evening by attending a club dinner, and they might have had a delightful talk over this great wonder. As it was, Mavis made the evening a

happy one for Mrs. Wynn, reading to her while she cared to be read to, and talking, when she tired of the book, on all the most cheerful topics she could find ; avoiding the home miseries, not only because her own heart was lifted out of them, but for the sake of her dejected companion.

‘I am sure she is really ill,’ thought Mavis, as she afterwards watched Mrs. Wynn dozing in her chair, with the faint smile that she had succeeded in calling to her weary face still resting upon it in her light slumber. ‘I must ask Jack what I ought to do.’

Again Mavis Wynn knelt in the moonlight by her little white bed, and hid her face in her hands ; but the thoughts that came thronging to her were full of amazement that it had been possible for her to be so miserable, when such happiness as was now hers had all the time been so near. It was almost frightening to think of that ; it taught her practically the hard lesson of our mysterious ignorance ; for

might she not, at her happiest moment, when Jack should be with her, and she most sure that he loved her, be parted from new sorrow by only as brief an interval?

This cloud passed quickly, like the thin vapours that were flitting across the silvery moon, and the girl's pure heart gave itself over to the security and innocent triumph of her love. Mavis was of a faithful and a grateful nature; her dead were not buried out of her sight. Never had the dear friends to whom she owed even Jack—because, little as there was in her to justify his love, she owed to them that there was anything—been remembered with more poignant tenderness. Ah, if they could have known! if they could only have been spared apprehension and anxiety, such as had troubled the closing days of both her aunt and uncle, with what additional radiance would the bliss that was now hers have been invested!

While these and myriads of other thoughts were crowding upon Mavis, there was not one

that did not centre in her lover. It was because Jack was Jack, and loved her, that the dear ones who were gone would have rejoiced for her. That the lover whose faith had just been plighted to her was the only son of her father's landlord, a gentleman of position and fortune, one entitled by the world's laws to mate far above her, did not at first enter into Mavis's mind. Her humility was unaffected, but it was altogether personal; only Jack and herself were present to her guileless and inexperienced thoughts. Only the dread of parting, more imminent and definite than when last night it had shaken her like the wind, broke up the lustrous serenity of the mirror into which she gazed, seeing those two images. Even that dread had been deprived of half its pain: for now, although, indeed, Jack would have to go away, they could not be parted in reality, and when he came back, it would be to her.

CHAPTER X.

AN APRIL DAY.

JACK BASSETT'S friends, Mr. Brett and Mr. Chancellor, had come over from the barracks at Chester. This, being Jack's first independent dinner-party at Bassett, was an occasion of some solemnity. He could not help thinking, ruefully, that it might also be his last. He was not blind to the fact that the proceedings of that day would add to the complication of affairs. Miss Nestle had made choice preparation for the entertainment of his guests. Jack had told the housekeeper that he was to join the Squire in London very shortly, and would soon be off to the war, and he was not a little surprised to find that she took the announcement easily; that, in fact, she was unmistakably

pleased. He idly wondered at this for a while, and then forgot it in the discussion of the projected festivity.

The three young men dined in the terrace room. It was a pleasant party. 'The Service' was a topic common to all now; and although they were surprised at Jack's change of purpose, they thought a great deal more about his luck in getting sent 'out' at once, and they eagerly discussed the prospects of their own corps. Everything connected with the war had hitherto been vague; the localities were obscure, and Mr. Russell's letters to the *Times* were only beginning to show the world how a special correspondent could educate it. Jack and his friends were intelligent, and interested in the matter. Among the Squire's books were some that treated of Russia and Turkey; after dinner the young men got out these, and also some maps, and discussed the coming campaign.

It was a fine moonlight night when Mr. Brett and Mr. Chancellor, being due at morning

parade, started on their drive back to Chester. Jack and they had a hearty parting at the farthest gate-lodge; where he jumped off the dogcart, and stood listening to its wheels in the stillness for some minutes, wondering when and where Brett and Chancellor and he should meet again. He walked slowly back to the house, enjoying the keen air and the solemn light and shadow. The image of Mavis then resumed its sway, and for that one night at least there was nothing in his mind but the ineffable triumph of the lover who has won his suit.

There was, however, a practical side to Jack Bassett's character, and this prevented him from shirking the straightforward consideration of all that was involved in the engagement between himself and Mavis Wynn. He had thought the whole position out next day, calmly enough, considering the depth and strength of his feelings, before the hour arrived at which he might reckon on seeing Mavis.

Coldly stated, the case was a hard one against Jack. He knew that it must be an additional and severe blow to his father to learn that he purposed marrying the daughter of a farmer : a man in no way superior in education and refinement to the generality of his class. That his father needed only to see Mavis to be aware of her superiority to all other daughters of all other farmers in Cheshire, or the world, her lover knew, of course ; but in the meantime he would have to take Jack's word for this superiority. Jack felt, too, that with all his indulgence, so recently experienced, his father was a proud man, with fixed ideas on the fitness of things, and as likely as the sternest and least accommodating of parents to think that he knew best what would be for his son's welfare and the family honour. Jack wished with all his heart that Mavis were not Farmer Wynn's daughter, but this did not advance matters ; he could only fall back on the reflection that every lesser consideration must give way before a creature so lovely and perfect as

Mavis, and that his own happiness as her accepted lover was too great to permit anything with which he might have to contend to distress him seriously. He was not going to be a rich man—even on the moderate scale of wealth that had been represented by Bassett before the big loss came—he was going to be poor, and of no particular importance to the world, the county, or anybody, except Mavis and his father. They need not live at Bassett—in fact, there was no chance of their being able to do so—and then it would not so much matter, although Mavis could hold her own anywhere. So far had his fancy travelled from the old love of his home, and the first pangs of regret with which he had learned how it was menaced. So utterly had love put prudence to flight, and taken possession of Jack, who, if selfish in this new and strong passion, was at least not ignobly selfish, but was ready to make sacrifices on his own part as well as to demand them on his father's.

His notions were as vague as they were romantic ; he did not look beyond the first obstacle in his path. To have to tell the truth to the Squire, just when he was leaving him to encounter alone a great change in his own mode of life, and all the anxiety that Jack's 'grand luck' must entail, was enough to give pause even to so resolute and exultant a lover.

Jack was so much engrossed and perplexed by his thoughts, that instead of going out, making a round of the stables, the gardens, and the place in general, as he usually did, with a cheery word for everybody, and a special eye to the welfare of the horses and dogs, and winding up with a visit to the Museum before luncheon—an attention which Miss Nestle prized highly—he remained in the book-room. The sun shone outside, and the soul of Trotty Veck was troubled by this deplorable departure from custom.

In his cogitations Jack took no account of

that side of the question which involved Wynn's sentiments. Nor did this arise from arrogance—he was free from that vulgar vice—but rather from heedlessness, and preoccupation with his own point of view.

Miss Nestle had already given her methodical mind to the supplying of Jack with every sort of requisite for his expedition to foreign parts. The present occasion she took to be very much like his former goings to school—only farther off, and with danger for him to get into instead of merely trouble—and he was diverted from his thoughts and the slow passage of the hours by having to correct the housekeeper's ideas of what he ought to take with him. She proposed to pack a small ship-load selected from the contents of the store-rooms and Museum, and met his representations of the probable restrictions upon officers' baggage with the stolid remark: 'The Squire won't like it, Mr. Jack. You never have been without your comforts, and why

you should leave 'em behind now that you are going among savages, I can't think.'

He was destined, before long, to come to the conviction that Miss Nestle's views had been much sounder than his own.

Profoundly did she afterwards enjoy the forwarding her rejected stores to the seat of war, and highly did she pride herself on having foreseen the great Crimean muddle, and forestalled the general despatching of hampers from home as a panacea for its miseries.

'I don't care where they are,' Miss Nestle would say, when the campaign was the subject of conversation, 'whether it's hurting themselves with lessons and games at school when they're boys, or going against the Litany in foreign parts with their battle, murder, and sudden death, when they're not much more; what I say is, they're all hearted-up by a hamper from home. You should see' (she would add as a clincher) 'what Mr. Jack wrote to the

Squire about the muffatees and marmalade he had out in the worst of it.'

Again Jack, observing the cheerful composure with which Miss Nestle regarded his approaching departure, reflected upon his luck. If the only woman who was officially privileged to make a fuss over him on this interesting occasion had thought proper to do so, it would have been a bore. It was not until he was on his way to Fieldflower Farm that the source of Miss Nestle's unlooked-for heroism occurred to him.

'She has suspected me more or less from the first,' thought he, 'and now she is glad I am going to be kept out of mischief.'

Neither love, trouble, nor his prospects had as yet taken boyishness entirely out of Jack Bassett. He laughed with the unembarrassed glee of that phase of existence, as he thought how mistaken the dear old lady was; how very thoroughly he had got into what she would call 'mischief.'

Again fortune favoured Jack, and he had a few minutes alone with Mavis in the Dame's Parlour. He availed himself of them to entreat that she would come out for a walk with him after he had seen Mrs. Wynn. He had a great deal to say to her, he pleaded, holding her in his arms, and filling his eyes and his soul with the quiet loveliness of her face, all suffused with a beauty new since yesterday; but their time was so short, so terribly short. Mavis started at the words; she had not realised that their parting was so imminent, but Jack broke it gently to her that after to-day they were to meet but once more, until the blessed time when he should come home and claim her as his wife.

‘My father expects me to join him in London on Thursday. My darling, it is very hard to say good-bye so soon; and yet I think every hour would make it harder. Sure though I am of you, it is almost death to go.’

‘And what is it to stay?’

‘Worse, I suppose. They always say so; they do that much justice to women, at all events.’

It is surprising what broad views of the virtues and sufferings of the whole female sex a man will take when he is in love; it is equally remarkable how his vision contracts when he has got out of love. All women were angels in Jack’s eyes just then. How angry he would have felt if anybody had hinted that very recently they had been merely a lot of girls!

‘Don’t look so frightened, darling, or Mrs. Wynn will see there’s something the matter.’

‘May I not tell her? She—she would be very glad; and she is so unhappy, and so ill.’

‘Not now—not just at this moment, I mean; I have so much to explain to you. I must talk to you first, without fear of interruption. You are free at this time?’

All his distaste to the supposed tasks that he hated to think of was in Jack’s tone, but Mavis took no note of this; she answered

simply that she was free, and could go out with him.

Jack found Mrs. Wynn in the big parlour, and looking ill. She was glad to see him, as usual, and heard with her customary acquiescence that he and Mavis were going to have a look at the swans' nest near the weir. By this Jack knew that the farmer was out of the way ; but she was even more than ordinarily quiet, inert, and subdued. She did not seem able to care much about anything, Jack thought. Mavis came in presently, looking lovely in the same straw hat that he had recognised so far off on one memorable day, and then the two set off for a walk in the earthly paradise.

It was, perhaps, due to the nearness of their parting, and to the quality of simplicity which they both possessed, that these newly betrothed lovers were not shy and embarrassed, and that perfect confidence rapidly established itself between them. The young man, as was natural, estimated far more justly than the girl the

seriousness of their independent disposal of their lives ; she was lost in the wonder and the joy of it. There was no mock humility about Mavis, nor was there any sham chivalry about Jack ; each honestly held the love of the other to be a boon beyond price. If Jack only had any notion of what was to be paid for it, that too was best.

They walked along the river's edge until they came to the swans' nest near the weir. It was among the reeds, like that famous nest in Mrs. Browning's poem, which Elsie was never to show to her lover ; and the mother swan was in it with her two cygnets—dingy creatures looking like changelings by the side of the snowy, downy, majestic, but far from amiable bird, a pensioner of Mavis, who carried bread to her every day. *Cygnus père* was sailing on the river, slowly trailing his black paddles, and seemingly unconscious of human intrusion ; but Mavis was up to his ways, and knew he would presently come close for his share of the

scattered bread, and would adjudicate that share liberally on his own side.

‘They quarrel about it sometimes,’ said Mavis, ‘and I am afraid Jill gets the worst of it. I call her Jill, and him Jack.’

She laughed and blushed, doing both divinely, her lover thought.

‘Do you indeed?’ said he; ‘so you are used to the name. But you have never called me Jack yet! Suppose you try?’

She laughed and blushed again, but she did try. Then Jack told her how he thought her name the sweetest ever devised for a woman, but had never liked his own until that moment. If any who read the story of this young pair, or any of their ancestors back to the most remote, have not heard, said, and believed exactly the same words in their time, they have been done out of an inalienable right.

The swans’ nest was in a convenient—*i.e.* solitary—place, and Jack might hold Mavis in his arms undisturbed, and she might lay her

face on his breast while she gave him her promise that every day on that spot she would think of him, and remember that she was his, solely and for ever, while the river they were standing by should run, and the wind that dried the tears on her cheek should blow.

‘I shall always be thinking of you,’ Mavis said as they began to retrace their steps; ‘and there will be nothing in my life, morning, noon, and night, to prevent me, or to hurry me in my thoughts. And nothing—nothing about myself only, I mean—can ever trouble me any more. You will always be able to be quite happy about me. Of course I know this cannot be so with you.’

The old wall of the fortress side of the farm, with the buttress and the ruined tower, was in front of them, to the right of the riverside path; that particular view of it was very picturesque. Mavis added, with a faint smile and a movement of her hand in the direction of the tower:

‘There’s a poem about the knights that went to the wars—I dare say some of them went from that old place—and about the ladies who were left for months and years—

Still bending o’er their ’broidered flowers,
With spirit far away.

I shall have something better than that to do before the time comes for me to look out of Dame Dorothy’s window, and wave my scarf to you like Doña Inez ; but my spirit will be as far away as any of theirs ever was.’

‘That must have been an awful life,’ said Jack, with profound conviction. ‘Lots of them, too, must have been old and ugly when the knights came back, none the better for the battering they had had.’

‘Oh, but that would not matter ; they would be all the same to each other.’

‘Ah, perhaps they would.’

Jack assented, but not confidently. He was glad Mavis had said this ; glad she should not have a doubt upon the subject : he knew

very nice women always do believe just that sort of thing.

‘It must have been dreadful,’ said Mavis : ‘they could not hear what was happening ; everybody could not be always sending off messages, and there was no post in the real old time—not at least when these walls were new. Oh, what those women must have suffered !’

‘Yes ; but then nobody was better off anywhere, and what people didn’t know they couldn’t miss,’ said Jack, getting rid of a digression from the one engrossing topic of lovers, themselves. But Mavis, even while she listened to his delightful love-talk, was thinking, with fresh reality and interest, of the old house, and all the lives it had seen. The joy that had come to her ; the pain and the waiting, the hope and the blessedness, that were coming, seemed in some mysterious way to make her a part of its past. The feeling gave her a solemn thrill. How many men and

women had loved, hoped, parted, within those walls, even as she and her lover, and were gone away for ever from the sun and the minds of men !

As they approached the house Mavis pointed out to Jack that in the last few days all the shrubs at the top of the ruined tower had sprouted, and overrun the broad broken edges, and that the young sprays and tendrils were beginning to creep downwards.

‘I shall sit there in the summer,’ she said, ‘when I can have some time to myself, and look over the fields and the woods toward Bassett. You can see the house, and a part of the garden terrace, from the tower.’

‘I have never been up in the tower,’ said Jack. ‘Let us go there now ; so that I may be able to see exactly where you are, when I shall have to think of you as thinking of me in the summer-time.’

They climbed the rough stone steps, and found themselves within the ruined walls.

Long ago, probably in Dame Dorothy's time, a flagged flooring had been laid over the winding internal stairs, and about four feet of wall rose above it; a stone bench formed a convenient seat, and even now there was abundant shelter in the greenery that had sprung from the crevices, and thriven amid moss and ivy roots. In the summer this would be a fairy bower. Jack was delighted with the view that broke upon him, revealing points of the landscape so familiar and so dear to him, under a new aspect.

The old house, in its commanding position on the hill, the spreading lawn, the woods putting on their tender green, the blue smoke rising in the pure air, the winding road and cultured fields that lay between Bassett and Fieldflower Farm, made up a fair and peaceful picture. Jack directed Mavis's eyes to all his favourite points, and they followed his guiding finger eagerly, but were turned on his own face with startled surprise when he said, in a changed

voice, 'It will be hard for my father to part with it all.'

'Part with it?'

'Yes, Mavis. This is a good time, and a good place, with all that was ours before my eyes, to tell you what has happened to my father.' He placed her on the bench by his side, and told her very simply that a great change had come over the fortunes of the Squire, and that it was only a poor soldier to whom she had promised herself; 'but the richest man in the world for all that,' he added, as he kissed the hand he had held while telling his story. His face was grave and steadfast, and she crept closer to his side, with an added sense of his strength and manliness, as, instead of the words of regret, or even sympathy, that he waited for, she said—

'Oh, I am so glad! for now it will not matter so much.'

'So glad, Mavis! what can you mean?'

'I am sorry for the Squire, of course;



'This is a good time, and a good place.'



and I ought to think of him first, but I cannot. Did you believe that I did not know what a difference there is between us? If you really are poor, as you say, and have to make your own way, so much the better for me. I shall be far, far happier, and surely the Squire will not mind so much?'

Jack was touched, but also relieved, by Mavis's words. They were worthy of her womanliness and simplicity, but they showed Jack that she was not all untroubled by the reflections that had disturbed him; she too was aware that the Squire might be expected to 'mind.' There would be no risk of his giving her offence by touching on his difficulties, and proposing a plan that had presented itself to him during their walk. This was no other than the keeping of their blissful secret from the knowledge of everybody, hoarding it up in their own hearts, a treasure of strength, hope, and consolation to both during his absence, not revealing it until, as he

hoped, his conduct and his fortune in the Service would have given his father such reason to be pleased with him that any concession would come easy to the Squire.

How cordially Jack Bassett now hated the memory of his recent follies ! With what contempt he regarded his own self of only a few weeks before ! The wholesome humility of a true love was in the young man's heart, as he assured Mavis, in all fervent sincerity, that she was a thousand times too good for him, and that his father, when he came to know her, would think so too, although he had much too high an opinion of his only son. It was entirely reasonable, according to their notions, for these young lovers to regard the fact that they loved each other as of supreme and unapproachable importance, and all other considerations as merely relative ; but so soon as they agreed to face those other considerations, generously to spare to them a slice out of their paradise, it was astonishing how they grew and waxed

strong. Jack was as yet a long way from asking himself any such practical question as how was he to marry, even were his liberally estimated 'chances' realised; but the other difficulties of the position began to define themselves.

A serious and business-like conference between the lovers now took place, in which Jack learned from Mavis enough of her daily life and experience to show him that his suspicions of Wynn were well founded. Mavis did not willingly tell the tale of her father's tyranny, and the wretchedness of her home, but she could not refuse her lover's appeal.

'I *must* know how I leave you, and to what,' he said; 'I *must* be able to follow your life from day to day. There cannot be any secrets between us.'

She was obliged to tell him that her father was unkind, harsh, and violent, and that she lived in great fear of him. Jack restrained as well as he could the wrath with which this

avowal filled him, and asked her how she thought Wynn would take their engagement?

‘I don’t know; I cannot guess. I know in reality nothing at all of my father outside of the things that happen every day. He tells us nothing; we are not his companions; we don’t know what he would think or do about anything. Because it would make me very happy, I—I am afraid he would refuse.’

‘Refuse! Why he cannot, Mavis; I mean he cannot prevent our marriage when the time comes. There is no power on earth,’ Jack went on, with flashing, angry eyes, ‘that can do that if you are true to me.’

‘And if you are true to me.’

‘Nonsense! that’s not the same thing. I true to you! Talk of that when the needle does not point to the north in these latitudes. I’m my own master, darling; no one can control me. But you may be bullied, and that is dreadful to think of.’

‘He never lets us know his mind. Even

now something is going on unknown to us. He has been constantly away. It would have been impossible for us to have seen you so often, if he had not been taken up with something that he is keeping from us.'

Jack privately bestowed a benediction on the farmer's secretiveness, and suggested that his conduct was a reason for their keeping their secret until circumstances should make it necessary to reveal it.

Mavis acquiesced; the suggestion was a great relief; but she begged for one modification.

'Mrs. Wynn is so fond of me,' she said, 'and she frets so much about me—though her own trouble might be enough for her—that I should like to be able to relieve her mind. It would be different for her if she might only know that nothing can harm or hurt me, that no one in the world can trouble me any more!'

'And that is so, Mavis?'

Jack spoke solemnly, and with tears in his

eyes, so beautiful was the girl's absolute trust and sacred love.

‘Yes,’ she answered, smiling. ‘That is what it means, isn't it?’

‘This is what it shall mean, so help me God!’

Mavis looked quietly at him, wondering a little at his emotion, and continued—

‘My life has been hard sometimes, but it will not be hard any more; and I shall be able to make it easier for her now that I shall not have myself to think of at all. The days will pass, not quickly, because for a while they cannot bring you, but they will be full of you; and the rest will not signify. Let me tell her, Jack.’

‘Of course you shall tell her. Poor woman! But I am glad she appreciates you, darling. And it will be better for you to have one person to speak to. Perhaps she will not be very much surprised. Don't you think she must have known that I fell in love with you that

day when she was so charitable as to tell me that you were at the parsonage? or at least that she must be well aware of the fact now?’

‘No, indeed, I am sure she is not,’ said Mavis, blushing celestially, and much confused; ‘because—because she thinks you are going to be married to a “great lady”—Miss Nestle told her so.’

‘Did she indeed?’ cried Jack, with a boyish, gleeful laugh. ‘What a well-conducted lover the great lady would have if I were he, and how divinely free from jealousy she would have to be! No, no, the great lady exists only in Miss Nestle’s imagination, assisted by her wishes. Even if I had never met you, Mavis, I could never marry for any motive but the one. Do you care to know this, my darling?’ He drew her closely to his breast, and spoke very low. ‘I am not all unworthy to ask for such a treasure as your love and promise; for, though I have been a fool in

many things, I have never even imagined that I loved any woman but you.'

These words achieved the turning of earth into heaven for Mavis.

The rest of their talk turned chiefly upon the mode of Mavis's life in the absence of Jack. Perhaps, if she had ever known paternal love, or filial confidence, Mavis would not have consented so readily to Jack's proposal of silence. But she had no sense that she was doing wrong towards her own father, and she implicitly believed that Jack must know best about his. Mavis had never seen the Squire.

The question of correspondence now arose, and it presented a difficulty. Mavis could not receive letters openly without question. It was rarely indeed that the letter-carrier brought anything to the farm, to the address of the farmer's wife or daughter. Twice or thrice a year, perhaps, the former would hear from her sister, who was now forewoman in a milliner's shop at Liverpool. Mavis occasionally had a

letter from a former pupil of her Uncle Jeffrey, a Miss Silcote, who lived in London ; but she had no other correspondent.

Jack's countenance fell when Mavis told him this, and he began to think, but with no immediate result, how the difficulty might be met. Nothing that he had seen or heard gave him so clear a notion of the narrow meagreness of the life to which Mavis was condemned, as this particular feature of it. How delightful it would be to rescue her some day from this vulgar dulness and slavery !

Mavis could make no suggestion ; when they had to go into details of this kind she felt the pain of the inevitable secrecy, and it embarrassed her. But she was not absolutely unreasonable ; she knew her happiness must have some drawback, and here it was.

‘We must let this point be unsettled until to-morrow,’ said Jack, looking at his watch, ‘for now I must leave you. I have to dress

and drive to Trescoe Park, and shall barely have time to do it in.'

'Are there many people staying there now?' Mavis asked timidly, as she took hold of his watch-chain, and curiously examined a bloodstone seal that hung from it, locket-wise. She was thinking how much she should like to see Trescoe Park, and the people with whom Jack passed his time; to get a glimpse of the favoured lives that were so entirely unknown to her. There was no touch of jealousy or envy in Mavis; her high-mindedness and sweet temper preserved her from such evil; she was simply curious and interested because Jack was concerned.

'I don't know,' he answered carelessly—
'there generally is a lot of people; but Sir Henry did not say. I don't want to go there, but I must bid the Trescoes good-bye.'

The utterance of the word saddened him. He sighed as he pressed his arm more closely about her waist, and his eyes fell on the

slender hand, with his seal lying on the open palm.

‘That was my mother’s seal,’ he said, ‘the only thing I possess that belonged to her. Will you keep it for me, until I can send you a ring in exchange for it? You must have an “engaged” ring, you know, my darling.’

‘Oh no, no!’ said Mavis, ‘I could not wear one; it would be seen.’

‘That’s true; I forgot. Well, it’s all the same, a ring or a seal. Wear this where it won’t be seen, and close all your letters to me with it.’

He loosed the seal from the chain, and gave it to her.

Jack’s mother! She had never heard him allude to her before. Was he like her? Mavis wondered. She had died young, as Mavis’s mother had died, but she must have been sorry to die; whereas the wife of David Wynn could only have been glad.

‘I must go,’ said Jack; ‘let us say good-

bye here. Though it's growing dark, you can see me almost all the way across the fields. Look! I can make out a car on the road now.'

'It is father's,' said Mavis. 'I cannot stay here. We will go down together.'

He left her at the door of the Dame's Parlour-side, and she rejoined Mrs. Wynn, again to find her in trepidation.

'You don't know how late it is,' she said, 'and there's many things behindhand. It's very pleasant for you to have so much of Mr. Jack's company, but I do wish he wouldn't stay so long. I doubt we shall get into trouble about it.'

'He is only coming once more,' said Mavis; 'he is going away on Thursday.'

Mavis would have been glad to tell Mrs. Wynn the truth then and there, but the wheels of the round car were drawing very near, and her story was not one to be told in a hurry. Mrs. Wynn seemed more of a 'poor creature' than usual this evening, and Mavis knew that

she was troubled about her ; but she smiled to think how baseless was the trouble, and how soon it would be dispelled. A light broke upon Mrs. Wynn when Mavis spoke ; the girl's voice and face revealed her feelings, to the great alarm of her stepmother, whose instantaneous thought was, ' If any harm comes to her through this, Wynn will kill me ! '

* * * * *

' Now you quite understand,' said Jack Bassett to Mrs. Wynn when the moment of parting was very near, ' the reason why I do not speak to my father and to Wynn, and let everybody whom it may concern know that Mavis is my promised wife ? You are satisfied—you, her best friend, are you not ? '

' I quite understand, Mr. Jack,' was Mrs. Wynn's answer, made with her inveterate submissiveness, at which Jack winced. ' And it is much better for us all as it is.'

It was in the Dame's Parlour that the lovers said their parting words. Mavis thought

of them afterwards for many a day, as though they had been spoken in a blessed dream. Solemn, amid their tenderness and passion, were the vows which the young man and the girl exchanged; for as Jack held Mavis in a close embrace he pronounced resolutely, and made her repeat after him, that awful promise: 'For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honour, and cherish, until death do us part.'

And then he was gone! Mavis, standing pale and rigid as a statue at the casement of Dame Dorothy's Parlour, saw him cross the little river, tie the boat up to the post, wave his hat to her, and take the path across the fields. The 'uncertain glory' had vanished from the 'April day.'

CHAPTER XI.

FARMER WYNN'S BUSINESS.

ALL the world was awaiting with deep anxiety, and reading, when they came, with intense interest, those famous letters in the *Times*, written from the East, which, for the first time in our history, made England a spectator of the great drama of her own destiny, while it was being acted upon foreign shores. The war was the great topic of the time, and countless hearts in the United Kingdom were thrilling with a hitherto unknown, unimagined dread. Actual hostilities had not yet begun, but the muster of the allied forces was going on briskly, and among the young officers who went out in the early period of those 'brave days' was Jack Bassett.

Every day of his stay in London was so fully occupied by the business of his start in life and the preparations for his voyage, that he had but little leisure for any talk with his father on matters not strictly relating to himself. He was well aware during that busy and hurried time that the Squire, acting with his invariable generosity, was expending money unsparingly, and making everything as easy as possible for him. He was also conscious that Mr. Dexter thought there was a little too much of this. The lawyer's notion was, that if circumstances render it necessary for a young man to be economical, and to learn the art of doing without, the sooner he enters on that course of education the better. His own early training had been of such a kind, and Mr. Dexter was on the whole not ill-satisfied with the result. If he had had the ordering of the proceedings in the present instance, the young soldier would have started off on the path to glory or the grave with a humbler kit and a

smaller allowance. But on those points the Squire would heed no advice and take no hints. Jack had had a tumble from his high horse already, and had picked himself up so cheerfully, with never a grumble, that his father could not bear to hold his hand in anything that would be for the brave and manly young fellow's comfort and welfare.

Those who have not closely observed of what exquisite tenderness and inventive affection some men are capable, would have called the Squire's care and foresight, in every provision and arrangement for his son, womanlike. Womanlike they would also have esteemed his self-repression and evasiveness, when Jack occasionally adverted to what his father meant to do by-and-by.

'By-and-by' was a good vague phrase; the young man used it naturally; he had no pre-science of all it signified; his mind was full of himself, his heart was full of Mavis. If he was a little careless, he was not ungrateful; the

concealment of what he felt to be the great fact of his life from the father of whose love and indulgence he received fresh proofs every day, sometimes gave him an uneasy twinge. The plea by which he assuaged the pang—that of consideration for the Squire—was a real reason, not merely an excuse.

To say that the Squire suffered much during those days of preparation for the parting that he dreaded, is only to say that he loved the son whom he was sending from him to danger, it might be death, with the singleness of a tender nature, which had but one object of affection. But in the perfectness of that one affection his strength lay ; it inspired him with the courage of self-sacrifice, and it made him completely reasonable in all his expectations from his son. The ‘ by-and-by ’ would be for him to consider and regulate when Jack was gone from his sight ; he was unfeignedly glad that his son’s easy-going nature had accepted the vague assurance that it would be ‘ all right.’

Thus there was not any shadow on those last days which the father and son passed together. The secret in Jack's breast did not produce the constraint that is almost always the result of confidence being withheld where it is due. The Squire bade him God-speed, and was left to the arrows that fly by night, without the slightest suspicion that he could have given his son a bit of supremely important information.

Mr. Bassett did not return home immediately after Jack's departure. Business arose to detain him in London. This was the prospect of a tenant for Bassett, who offered terms as advantageous as Mr. Dexter had ever hoped to secure, and who was willing to consult the convenience of the Squire with respect to the time of taking possession.

Mr. Dexter was in good spirits. He had been disposed to demur to the Squire's letting Jack go away without having the whole of his father's intentions made plain to him, but he had forborne from urging this view, reflecting that if

he carried his point it would probably do more harm to the father than good to the son. The Squire's intentions he could not but approve, while he profoundly regretted them. The offer for Bassett came exactly at the right moment to facilitate their being carried out without delay, and with the minimum of inseparable and inevitable pain.

‘A retired silk merchant, formerly of Lyons ; an Englishman, very English in looks and speech ; very fond of travelling, not likely to be much at home, and yet anxious to take Bassett for ten years, although he has no connection with the neighbourhood. It sounds odd, doesn't it?’ asked the Squire of Mr. Dexter.

The aspirant had called on Mr. Dexter in the afternoon, and the Squire and his friend were discussing the interview after dinner.

‘I don't see that. A man who has lived his life and made his money in a town, must break quite new ground when he comes into the country, and is as likely to be led by the eye as

by any other consideration. This appears to be Mr. Lansdell's case; he has seen Bassett, and fallen in love with the place at first sight.'

'Seen Bassett! When? I don't remember any one of that name ever coming there.'

'No, he does not know you. He was there last week. He came to know that you might be open to an offer through your tenant, Farmer Wynn. He met Wynn at Chester, and got into conversation with him accidentally. It was he who took Mr. Lansdell to Bassett, and procured him a sight of the house, without waiting for formal permission from you.'

The Squire smiled:

'Wynn thought he was advancing his own business by giving mine a shove. And he is right. When 'tis to be done, 'twere well that it were done quickly. I wonder what sort of reception Miss Nestle gave him. It would not have been a cordial one if she had any inkling of the truth.'

The Squire spoke lightly, but there was

a look of anxiety in his face. The faithful servant, who would regard any interruption of the decorous and long-descended prosperity of Bassett of Bassett as unaccountable misbehaviour on the part of Providence, was a serious consideration to him. It would be hard to console or appease Miss Nestle ; she would be sure to denounce the law and its exponents, and to hold, until the end of her days, the firm belief that the Squire had been victim of a dark conspiracy.

‘ Ah ! I wonder,’ said Mr. Dexter. ‘ He was immensely pleased with everything, and, as you know, applied to me ; that, also, on Wynn’s information. He is a shrewd and practical man, I should say, but, like many men of that kind, content to pay a fancy price for a fancy. He was very cordial and pleasant when the formal part of our interview was over, and seemed chiefly anxious to make it plain that he was entirely at your disposal in all secondary matters.’

‘Will it be necessary for me to meet this gentleman?’

‘Not exactly necessary,’ answered Mr. Dexter, ‘at least for the present; but, as you will certainly have to meet him afterwards, and will like to be on friendly terms with him, if only for the sake of your people’—(he knew his words were making the Squire wince, but he felt bound to say them)—‘do you not think it would be as well for you to make his acquaintance now?’

The Squire agreed, but with evident reluctance. Here was a point on which his habit of procrastination would have led him into hesitation that could only cause more pain in the future. It was like him to have made up his mind, with external calmness and comparative ease, to the great change in his way of life that was demanded, and then to find a single detail of it almost intolerable, to shrink from coming face to face with the man who was to fill his place. He leaned forward, with his elbow on the table,

and his eyes shaded by his hand, while Mr. Dexter repeated the sum of the conversation between himself and Mr. Lansdell, and thought that the feelings of a disembodied spirit, revisiting the scene where it had lived, been replaced, and forgotten, would be something like his own. But he soon shook off this mood, and was his patient and practical self once more.

There was so much good-will on both sides, that the weighty matter of the letting of Bassett, the park, the home-farm, and the house, to Mr. Lansdell for ten years, at a rent which would enable the Squire to do all that was obligatory upon him, was effected with surprising celerity. Before a hint of the changes impending at Bassett had reached the ears of the neighbourhood, while the prolonged absence of the Squire and the departure of Jack were still talked of at the general shop in the village, and at the gatherings in the churchyard after divine service, a great revolution had been silently effected, and the house on the hill had

passed into the tenancy of a stranger whose name had never been heard in the place.

It was not the least remarkable feature of a transaction which had sufficient appositeness and concurrence of convenience to realise Tony Lumpkin's 'concatenation accordingly,' that Mr. Lansdell was not only in no hurry to take possession of his newly acquired mansion, but that he was actually about to leave England. He was detained only by the formalities of this important transaction, whose every step was easy, smooth, and satisfactory. The necessary documents were completed ; the necessary investigations proved entirely satisfactory ; the Squire and Mr. Lansdell met, and got on very well together. Certain feelings inseparable from the position, and his anxiety to observe what manner of man the person was who must now inevitably possess influence in the place where he himself had so long exercised it, preserved the Squire from falling into the absence of mind that sometimes made strangers

set him down as cold, stiff, and indifferent. The manner of the new master of Bassett was blameless.

It had not escaped the quick perception of Mr. Dexter that the Squire's tenant was very observant of him, although he did not make the mistake—into which a less well-bred person might have fallen—of pressing attentions upon Mr. Bassett. The arrangement by which the Bassett library was to remain undisturbed was suggested by Mr. Lansdell as a favour to himself, and he added a request that, as much as possible, the household should be left as it was then constituted. At this Mr. Dexter shook his head: the mainstay of all things at Bassett was Miss Nestle, and she would go with the Squire, however heart-breaking it might be to her to leave the scene of her long and undisputed rule. No doubt she would not refuse to make proper provision for the well-being of the house; but, as Mr. Dexter felt certain she would hate Mr. Lansdell's very name, he did

not venture to be cordial in his assurances. He got out of the matter, as he thought, by suggesting that as the new tenant did not intend to take immediate possession, or even to visit the place at present, he ought to be represented there by his own man of business. At this point a fresh surprise awaited Mr. Dexter. Mr. Lansdell told him that he was not in the habit of employing any such functionary; that he transacted all his affairs himself, as he had done in the present instance; and, in everything that concerned Bassett during his tenancy of the place, wished Mr. Dexter himself to act for him.

‘There cannot, I am sure, be any objection, either professional or personal, to your doing this,’ continued Mr. Lansdell. ‘The interests of Squire Bassett and myself cannot possibly clash in any way; and it would be impossible to devise an arrangement better for both parties.’

The Squire, to whom Mr. Dexter referred

this proposal, was of Mr. Lansdell's opinion ; the new tenant had his own way in this particular also, and the business was concluded with friendliness on all sides.

Mr. Lansdell went back to his hotel, after his final visit to Mr. Dexter, in a complacent state of mind. Before he was at liberty to eat his last dinner and go to his last play in a city where the sun's visits were of the angelic order, he had only to write the following lines to a friend :—

‘ It is all settled. I start to-morrow. D. is a fine old fellow, but you were right ; he is much too honest to be trusted—it was well you saw him and discovered that. I shall report myself speedily.

‘ D. L.’

The writer addressed this missive to—

‘ Monsieur Reveillon,

‘ Rue Neuve des Mathurins, 100,

‘ Paris.’

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It would still be some time before news of Jack could reach England. In the Crimean war time we used to talk about the suspense to which our predecessors were condemned in the days of the Great Duke and the Corsican adventurer, and now, regarded in comparison with the daily epitome of the current history of the world for which we now look as a matter of course, communication seems to have been slow in 'the fifties.' The Squire lingered on in London until he had heard from Jack of his safe arrival, and all the world was reading the brilliant *Times* correspondent's letter that told of the making of the intrenched camp at Bulari, the vastness and convenience of the new barracks at Scutari, and the approaching departure of the allied forces for Varna.

The Squire was affected as well as pleased by Jack's letter. The boy was a man now, and a soldier; taking heartily to the life that he had selected for himself; an active life, at least in this initial stage of it. What would he make

of it? The Squire asked of Fate the same question we all ask about our children, and followed it up with the reflection that comes to the majority of us, whatever may be our external record: 'I trust not such a failure as I have made of mine.' Then, referring again to the letter that seemed to him to mark an epoch, the Squire dwelt with satisfaction upon the unlikeness of Jack to himself. 'He has every quality that goes to the forming of a successful, popular, happy man; he will not be ruled by the fastidious pride and the egotistical sensitiveness that have made the very opposite of me. I don't think Jack will ever disappoint me, or be himself disappointed very deeply by anything, after the admirable way in which he has taken all this.'

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The 'general shop' is an old-world institution still surviving in many English villages, and at the time of this story it usually combined the proper purposes denoted by its name

with the functions of a post-office. The general shop in the village of Bassett was a case in point, and a great centre of news and gossip as well. Its proprietor was a Welshman, so like Reuben Jones, come to more than middle age, and worn with prolonged distribution of groceries, cheap prints, choice flannel, articles of ironmongery, and postage stamps, that he might have been that youth's father—only he wasn't; and indeed, Lewis, the baker, whose shop was next door, was equally like the typical Welsh boy. Mrs. Williams was also black-haired, beady-eyed, red-cheeked, and she might have been Mr. Williams's sister, so much did she resemble him. She was, however, only his far-away cousin, and active, dutiful, imperious wife. This childless couple were as greedy of gain as if they had had a hungry brood to provide for, and their community of motive united them with thoroughness such as the finest tastes and talents possessed in common by a wedded pair will sometimes fail to produce. It was

chiefly through Squire Bassett's influence that they had been given the post-office to keep, and the privilege, though not lucrative in itself, had realised the calculations of Mrs. Williams to a nicety. Even in such a quiet village as Bassett, people made a sort of centre of a place into which news was constantly drifting, and where a word or two with a neighbour might be had at most times for the trouble of crossing the street. A steady stream of small remunerative custom poured into the general shop, and when the bright idea struck Mrs. Williams that they might as well do a little trade in newspapers—for which an unprecedented demand sprang up about that time—the 'London parcel' hour saw a daily group awaiting her leisurely distribution of the journals.

At the general shop the first rumour of something wrong at Bassett arose; no one could tell exactly how, nor was it ever traced to its source. Some one from the village, who had been employed up at the House, had

brought back and liberally dispensed a story of how Miss Nestle was terribly put out about something, and 'that arbitrary and particular no one couldn't please her;' and how, as it was well known she had nobody belonging to her, and did not 'look beyond' the Squire, there could be no doubt but that trouble had come to him. This story went farther than this, even extending to a hint, from which the talebearer seemed to shrink as from something sacrilegious, of the House being let to a strange family, and the Squire going away 'to foreign parts.'

This rumour reached the ears of Mavis Wynn, as she stood before the rail of the dark little hutch, on one side of the shop, in which the post-office business of Bassett was transacted by Mr. Williams, while his wife served their customers at the other side. 'Any letter for you to be kept till called for, Miss?' Williams repeated after her, with provoking slowness, and turning to a shelf at the back of the hutch, while her heart beat so strongly that

it seemed to rock her from side to side as she stood.

‘Any letter for you to be kept till called for? Well, yes, there is one, by this morning’s mail, London postmark.’

He turned over a small packet as lingeringly as though he could not bear to part with the precious thing, and at last pushed it towards Mavis with the remark :—

‘The carrier’s gone up your way with a registered parcel.’

Mavis had come for Jack’s first letter from the East, and she now held it in her hand ; the envelope was directed by herself, and it had been posted for him by a friend in London. Jack had devised this means of overcoming their difficulty. It had been arranged between them that whenever the newspaper intelligence informed Mavis that letters had been received from the army in the East, she was to apply at the village post-office. The lovers were not unaware that there was some risk in this plan ;

that in so small a place as Bassett things were apt to get talked of, and that village postmasters were not always models of discretion ; still, there was nothing else for it. The incurious and uninterested manner in which Mr. Williams had attended to her inquiry on the present occasion, and also previously when she asked for the two letters to which Jack prudently restricted himself while he was in London, was reassuring to Mavis ; very likely he thought nothing at all about the circumstance, and would forget it. She turned towards the counter behind which Mrs. Williams was standing, and asked for some household trifle ; and then she heard what two women, who were enjoying a comfortable gossip while they compared samples of flannel, were saying. She had full opportunity of listening to their discourse ; for Mrs. Williams was so much engrossed by it that she took no notice of Mavis's modest request, but stood, absorbed, with the yard-measure in her hand.

‘Well, that is a wonderful thing, to be sure,’ said Mrs. Williams, when all the tale had been unfolded; ‘and I’m sure I hope it’s no come-down along of the young gentleman that’s gone to the wars.’

‘Oh dear! I heard nothing of that,’ said the informant, while the other woman shook her head with a comfortably lamentable air. ‘but of course there’s no saying, Mrs. Williams. We mostly are punished through our idols, you know, and it’s well for them that has not got any. But Squire Bassett will be a sore miss for many; and, dear heart, but it will be cur’ous to have strangers up at the House.’

‘What did you want, Miss?’ asked Mrs. Williams, roused by Mavis’s moving towards the door, and abandoning the gossips for the moment. Mavis constrained herself to make her small purchase, and then escaped with the precious letter.

She was not greatly disturbed by the talk she had overheard, for she held it to be merely

an exaggeration of the truth as Jack had told it to her. 'The land will have to be let up to the windows,' he had said, but never a word of the Squire leaving his own house. Mavis carried Jack's letter unopened to the top of the tower, a rich bower of varied greenery now, where she was hidden from every eye, and read it, with such throbs of joy and pain as love-letters have caused since the first of them—where is the antiquary who will put a date to it?—was written.

The letter was characteristic of its writer. All the narrative part of it was succinct and simple; the lover's talk was like Jack's spoken words, manly and earnest, with fervour and fidelity in it which would be surprising if not altogether ridiculous in these different days, when, if modern chroniclers of the time are to be believed, it is the women and not the men who make all the love. Jack ended with an entreaty to her to get herself brought under his father's notice as soon as possible. 'There

will be nothing awkward in your going up to see Miss Nestle now,' wrote the simply-astute lover, who had carefully concealed from Mavis his discovery of Miss Nestle's suspicions. 'My father has only to learn what you are to love you; to know that the best that could befall him would be to have you for his daughter.'

She read the precious pages many times, kissed them, and shed over them tears, that to her far-distant lover would have been pearls of great price, to be gathered by his lips from her fair cheeks, but which the lonely wind had now to dry. At last Mavis placed the document in a little silken case containing Jack's first letters and the seal he had given her, and hid them away in her bosom, together with the image that reigned there, never to be displaced. She was consoled, elated, made happy by her lover's letter; she was strong to face the tasks of the day, and whatever it might bring.

Mrs. Wynn was in the big parlour. Mavis

found her regarding with uneasy wonderment a bulky parcel that had come by post, and speculating on its probable contents.

‘Your father wasn’t in, and so I signed for it,’ said Mrs. Wynn. ‘Just feel it, Mavis; it crackles for all the world like lawyers’ paper—parchment, I mean. Perhaps it’s his will; but he hasn’t been ill lately, and he’s not the man to make his will so long as he can avoid it.’

‘Never mind what it is, Sarah,’ said Mavis, as she hovered about her stepmother in the graceful caressing way that to the forlorn woman was balm for all but the most grievous and incurable of her wounds. ‘I have something worth thinking of to tell you. I have a letter from Jack, from Scutari; he is safe and well, and he writes in such good spirits.’

Then Mavis repeated the contents of her lover’s letter, with omissions, and patiently explained to Mrs. Wynn the localities and the

interests of which he wrote, and which she had studied by every means within her reach, since that far-off country, whose soil Jack Bassett trod, had become a glorified land to her who loved him.

Life had been no easier in any of its external circumstances to the women at Field-flower Farm since the departure of Jack. There was no change in the moroseness, varied only by violence, of the man who held them in a bondage as real and as hopeless as that of household slaves in pagan times, and there was no variety in the round of their occupations. But they both bore their weary life better : Mavis, because there was within her breast a source of happiness that no one and nothing in her daily existence could trouble ; and Mrs. Wynn, because her unselfish nature had at length found an outlet for its disinterested tenderness, and also because the unknown dear delight of a love-affair engrossed her to a surprising extent. She was never tired of talking

of Jack ; many and wild were her speculations as to what he was to achieve, and how ' high up ' he would be on his return. Sometimes she would approach the subject of Mavis's future grandeur as the mistress of the House on the hill ; but Mavis shrank from that part of the subject. She could dream dreams of the ' poor soldier ' life, sketched out by Jack, and, to her fancy, Elysian ; but she had no ambition in her, beyond that vast ambition which had already found so surprising a realisation.

Mavis knew from Jack that he had written at length to his father. She was talking to her stepmother of the Squire ; saying that she wished much to see him, yet felt nervous about it, and was just going to tell Mrs. Wynn the foolish tale she had overheard at Williams's, when the unexpected appearance of her father checked her.

' Is there a parcel come by post ? ' he asked, barely crossing the threshold of the room.

‘Yes, father,’ said Mavis, rising, and handing it to him. He slammed the door and went into the small adjoining room.

‘I thought we shouldn’t know what is in it,’ said Mrs. Wynn, with childish resignation ; ‘he would be sure not to open it before us.’

The next minute Wynn returned, and bade his wife see to getting a room ready for Mr. Reckitts.

‘He is coming over from Crewe this evening,’ said Wynn, ‘and you had better look sharp and see that he’s comfortable.’

He spoke in his usual bullying tone, yet Mavis fancied he did not use it altogether naturally. Mrs. Wynn quietly replied that she would see about the room at once ; but she showed no curiosity. He turned towards the door and spoke again, in his surliest manner :

‘I have something to say to you two before Reckitts comes. When you’ve seen to things upstairs, come back here.’

Mavis and her stepmother exchanged alarmed looks as they went upstairs, but did not speak until they were quite out of his hearing.

‘Mavis,’ said Mrs. Wynn, in a half-whisper, ‘what can it be? I’m frightened!’

Wynn was standing in front of the fireplace in the big parlour when his wife and daughter returned. His hands were thrust into his pockets, and his face wore its blackest look. Mrs. Wynn, with fear and feebleness painfully written on her countenance, sank into a chair near the door, and wrapped up her shaking hands in her black silk apron. Mavis, though rather pale, stood by her side composedly, and waited for the farmer to speak. Her heart was strong, for it beat against her lover’s letter.

‘What I’ve got to say to you is this,’ Wynn began, ‘and you would have heard it sooner, only for the cursed clack of you women, when you’ve got to do anything you mayn’t like.

I've been tired of the farm for a good bit, and making up my mind to take to another kind of life. I've settled matters with my brother. Reckitts takes the farm, just as it stands, and you'll have to sail for Melbourne in three weeks.'

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





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